Love Your Brother
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Love Your Brother

by D_Reagan_Fly

Summary

Four years after Thor the Dark World Jane stumbles onto a secret about Loki's past that will unravel consequences. Not everything in Asgard is as it seems, especially in the Odinson family. Grief is a loyal friend, the dead never really leave you, there is no future without forgiveness and redemption is for anyone who will take it.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone! Welcome to the ultimate D-dump! (For those of you who don't know what that means it means dumping excessive amounts of pain, angst, tears -happy and sad- and a ridiculous amount of writing in a short period of time onto the internet...) I love writing and I love my characters and all my readers. :) This is my first published Loki fanfic and it is finished.

Here's a couple things to know about this one:

1. This takes place four years after The Dark World.

2. Thor and Jane got married and she came to live with him on Asgard (which was

not smashed because Ragnarok hasn't happened- alternate timeline-)

3. Baby Frigga is Thor and Jane's child, not a reincarnation of his dead mom.

4. Thor was a good bro and brought his injured brother to earth with him where he

received minimal medical treatment while Thor fought evil elf and saved the world.

5. Loki was brought back for trial and real medical treatment Asgardian style and has

basically been placed under house arrest for all of eternity with no rights of a Prince (though he was allowed to keep the title.)

Please Comment! And enjoy!

-D.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 1
A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for a time of adversity.
Proverbs 17:17
****

Jane never thought she would care about her brother-in-law. Not even a bit.
She knew Thor did and, for his sake, she forced civility, but never thought there was a risk of actually caring about her new brother. She never thought she'd love him like she did…

It had begun with Baby Frigga… her husband had finally convinced her--resentfully-- to allow his brother to care for the child while they were away for a few hours.
Baby Frigga was sleeping soundly on Loki's chest as Thor and her returned from their first evening out in months. Loki himself was also asleep, slid down low in his chair with one hand cradling his niece and the other drowsily slipping from its place in a book. It was her book of Asgardian constellations. A rag was slung over his shoulder beneath the infant where he'd been burping her and the child was expertly swaddled in a green wrap.

Thor gave a sad smile at his brother's sleeping form and silently helped her out of her cloak. She wondered at Thor's look, but wondered more at his brother. Where was the raging killer on Svartalfheim? Who was this domesticated intellect? Thor was right...he had not harmed their child, in fact he rocked her to sleep. Jane tried not to gape.
She had been worried sick the entire time. It had taken Thor three weeks to convince her to condone his brother watching the child, and she had almost backed out minutes before. Loki had been quiet and resigned, in the same way and manner he'd been for the past four years, but complied to his brother's request only questioning it once. When Thor had practically begged him and lamented the few hours of sleep his wife and he had had since the babe was born, and the fewer hours of diversion, a ghost of a smile brushed Loki's pale and gaunt face and he had agreed. Three times while they were out Thor had to convince her to stay. Had all her worry been for naught?

Thor quietly stepped over to his brother and placed a heavy hand gently on his shoulder, opening his mouth to wake Loki easily. But the darker brother's eyes snapped open immediately at first contact and he launched himself over the back of his chair backwards, infant still clutched to his chest. Jane shrieked in terror for her child but as he backed toward the balcony the child still slept soundly and safely in a tender embrace. Loki blinked sleep and fear from his eyes and looked around the room in bewilderment.

Thor raised his hands slowly and promised, "I didn't mean to startle you. Are you alright?"

Loki frowned and pressed his hand in a protective cage around little Frigga's head. "...Thor?..." He mumbled, blinking and squinting in confusion. Jane's heart pounded and she stepped forward to snatch her infant from his arms, eager to have her safely against her breast. Loki took a step back and a dagger came from his magic to protect the child.

"Loki." Thor's voice was gentle and soft, as though he were assuring a frightened child. "It's all right, please give Frigga back to Jane…"

"Frigga?..." Loki looked down at the child in his arms and his eyes widened before clamping shut against something harsh and unbearable. When they opened and landed on Jane they were teary and burning with an unspeakable agony.

Wordlessly he handed the little girl back over to Jane who cradled her child protectively, her face puzzled, as Loki avoided her gaze and whispered to Thor,

"Sorry, brother, I thought…" His voice trailed off the edge of the world and dove into the silence of another reality. One too brutal and painful to be spoken aloud. Jane's heart still raced against her.

Thor murmured back, "I know, Loki." He approached his brother slowly, as though to comfort him, but Loki stiffened and stumbled over to the chair to retrieve his jacket. Thor stopped with a look so pained he might have been stabbed. "Loki--" He started.

"She, ate well and fell asleep on time." Loki interrupted quietly, "I am sorry if I frightened you, Jane." He hesitated in the threshold of the door as though he wanted to say something more, but finally finished with, "You're constellations are very accurate."

He then turned quietly and slunk away. There was a time when Loki sauntered, a time when Loki stumbled, a time where Loki slipped, but now he slunk. A slithering shadow afraid of the sun.

Jane watched Thor's knuckles whiten as they clenched around the back of the chair and his gaze was tortured and distant.

“Thor?” She asked hesitantly, “What was that?”

“Something of the past.” He forced out, closing his eyes forcefully and taking a mighty breath. When they opened they were grim and grieved, great sorrow sinking into deep blue depths helplessly. “Let’s put her to bed.” he gave a tortured but tender smile at his child before stepping forward to help his wife.

That night as they lay in bed, Jane’s head resting upon her husband’s bare chest, fingers webbed through his, she finally voiced the small voice in her head with a quiet,

“Thor…? Loki knows a lot about children...doesn’t he?...”

“Yes.” The prince whispered back.

“Thor…does he...did he..was there ever….” She broke her sentence off, not sure how to finish the thought.

“What is it you want to know, my love?” Thor gave a heavy sigh.

“Does Loki have a child, Thor? “ She sat up to watch his face for an answer.

It twisted painfully and he gave her a small broken smile.

“He did.” Was all he said, and Jane’s heart cracked.

“And…?” She asked, breathlessly, afraid. Not really wanting to know what happened, but needing to...because the way he held baby Frigga...the way his dagger had come up...the way the terror had shown in his emerald gaze...the way Thor had said; “I know.” But she didn’t know...and she needed to.

“And it is not my story to tell, my sweet.” Thor whispered, tears glistening in the moonlight from the window. Jane felt her own surface simply for the fact that they rose in Thor’s and an understanding was to be gleaned from this admittance. “I can only tell you that Loki was once a father and his child is now no more. If you wish to know more, you will have to ask him… although I ask you to tread with caution… grief is a terrible force.”

Jane nodded quietly before slipping under the covers again and curling into Thor’s side.

Sleep did not come quickly that night.

Chapter End Notes

Please Comment! I really really want to hear what people think!

Find me on Instagram @d_reagan_fly for my thoughts on writing, fanfiction, character development, character enneagrams/myers briggs, and more!

Chapter 2

Chapter 2

“When I look into the face
Of my enemy
I see my brother
I see my brother”

“Brother” The Brilliance

Jane had decided to visit her brother in law for the first time in the four years. Since she’d met Thor’s dark and menacing younger brother, she actually made quite a point of avoiding him before, but after that strange night she found an unsustainable need for answers only he would give her; according to Thor.

She’d seen Loki four times in the past four years and that had originally been quite enough for her. The first time was when she’d visited the healing chambers with Thor, directly after the Aether incident and Loki’s injury on Svartalfheim, because her husband to be hadn’t wanted to go alone. He didn’t know if Loki would want to see him. It hadn't actually mattered what Loki had or hadn't wanted, he’d been feverish and delirious for much of the conversation.

It had been so uncomfortable that Jane didn’t remember anything besides the coiling of Thor’s shoulders as she tried to comfort him, the nervous looks coming from the healers everytime Loki would get too excited and wring that sickening rattle cough from his severed lungs, and the terrifying brightness of Loki’s emerald green eyes. They hadn’t looked that green when she’d met him for the first time. They been a murky blue-green. But in the healing chambers they’d been sharp and bright as polished emerald.

Second, he’d been at the wedding, though he’d refused to stand by Thor’s side as his brother, opting instead to stand in the shadows and avoid Thor’s gaze. He’d met hers once as she was swearing her eternal soul together with Thor’s, and she had noticed he hadn’t even worn his ceremonial garb. When that still startling emerald gaze met hers, she’d sent him a scathing glare. Hadn’t Thor said something about ceremonial armor showing your relationship to your family? Was Loki blatantly throwing his family out? What better an event to do that publicly in than his brother’s wedding? She hated him. She hated that he got to walk around free after trying to smash New York, after killing Thor in New Mexico, after stabbing Coulson to death. Even if she hated Coulson, she hated Loki more.

Third, a year later, she’d seen Loki at the breakfast table only once, when Thor had expressly begged him to come and eat with the family. Jane couldn’t particularly blame him for avoiding those… she found that when Thor and Odin weren’t yelling at each other they were mastering the art of passive aggression. Odin usually played the instigator by either vaguely insulting Loki or herself and then Thor not so vaguely would remind him that they were both, technically by law, his children and he would be a far better king if only he would recognize his children, subjects and allies as equals. Then a heated debate on politics would begin and end in an icy shut down by Odin who always left said family breakfasts early.

So, no, Jane couldn’t particularly blame Thor’s outcast little brother for avoiding these awkward family breakfast’s… she could only imagine how much more pleasant they must have been when Frigga’s seat wasn’t empty.

The only meal Loki had been at Odin had railed at him loudly the entire time and this time Loki was the first to leave. He sat prim and proper and let Odin scold him for this or that and blatantly mock him for his shortcomings and failures while he ate his meal as if in complete ignorance that Odin was even speaking.

“I’m sure you’ll be glad to hear that attempts to reconcile with Midgard are still failing miserably! If it weren’t for your brother we might have a full staged rebellion. After your pitiful little invasion they refuse to make treaties of any long period of time for fear that it will happen again. When I assured them that…” And on and on and on. Thor kept trying to speak up, but Odin had this growl yell thing that always made him shut up. All it did to loki was illicit an award worthy eye-roll.

It was probably the only time Jane had felt anything other that hate or fear around Loki. She almost respected him for that interaction. She wasn’t Odin’s number one fan by any means. Thor continued trying to intervene and defend his silent brother, but Odin wouldn’t have it and he kept huffing and puffing till the house blew down.

“--and you’re mother would be ashamed of you, you ungrateful Jotun-veslingr!” Brought an abrupt end to his tirade.

Her husband had sucked in a sharp breath beside her. Her brother-in-law had raised a knife thin eyebrow and lifted his head to stare at Odin who, to his own defense, had snapped his mouth shut finally and looked as though he might have realized he went to far with that one.

Jane, for one, didn’t know what a jotun-veslingr was, but she was guessing by the three men’s reactions it was highly insulting, and she felt how painful the barb of their mother must have been wielded against him. Ashamed of you.

“I know.” Loki said after a few moments of letting Odin marinate in his own made silence. Then carefully, he set his spoon down, stacked his own plates and stood quietly.

“Good day, Prince Thor, Lady Jane,” He offered them each a formal, rather than familial title, and a slight bow. “Allfather.” He deadpanned without a bow, before collecting his dishes and carrying them out.

Thor sucked in another painful breath, Odin looked like his jaw might drop to the floor and the server girl looked like she might be about ready to panic as she trailed out after the quiet prisoner prince. Jane did catch the meaning of this cultural implication. Loki had just expressed that he had more in common with the servants that washed the floors, dishes, and toilets than the royal family. Whether that was because he was better than them or worse was left up to the interpretation of those at the table.

He never ate with the family again.

And Jane really couldn’t blame him.

Then the last time she’d seen Loki was that night that he’d watched Frigga for them. After that incident she was too curious to ignore him any longer. Loki was a puzzle waiting to be solved. A mystery… and a dangerous one at that. Even as a young mother Jane couldn’t turn down the chance at finding something new… especially with a healthy dash of danger. And honestly, a part of her was wondering if she’d like her psychotic-quiet-sullen-brother-in-law better than her loud-angry-racist-specist-bigot-of-a-king/father-in-law. Apparently Loki had lost a child. What had Odin lost? ...Well...his wife… but he was a jerk-face before Frigga died. He called Jane a goat.

She had no idea what Loki was like before...his personal...tragedy (whatever it was) hit… but if

Thor's reaction to any of this was anything to go by… Loki was a vastly different person. She wanted to know who he had been… what he once was.. And maybe (just for curiosity sake) who he was now.

Seeing him four times in the past four years, while living under the same roof as him simply wasn't acceptable anymore.

So the morning after Thor and her had gone out, Jane decided to visit her brother-in-law.

Thor was going to be in meetings all day with the Council and king, and she had a day all to herself and Frigga. So after kissing Thor goodbye and chatting with Gertrude, the older servant woman-- and so far Jane's only real friend in Asgard save her husband-- she packed up baby and book and set out on her mission. She didn't realize until she'd left their hall that she didn't have the slightest clue where Loki's chambers were. She sighed and shifted the sleeping Frigga to her other arm. She should have asked Gertrude.

She wandered a bit through the main halls and a few of the side wings she'd already explored, hoping for some inspiration. After a half-hour she was desperately looking for someone to ask but was a bit embarrassed to ask where one of her family members (estranged as he was) lived. She should know this. They'd been related for three years now!

Suddenly a shadow caught her eye and she noticed the red-headed servant girl that had waited on Loki at the wedding and the failed family breakfast. The girl looked to be a teenager--Jane was still not quite sure how many centuries that was here on Asgard, but on Earth the girl couldn't be more than fifteen.

She was short and slim, wearing a straight cut, forest green dress to show her Master's colors, and had an auburn red pony-tail that curled in soft wisps to the middle of her back. Jane opened her mouth to call out but suddenly stopped when she noticed… the child had pointed ears. Pointed. Long and gracefully extending from her head like a fawn of some kind. Her facial structure wasn't quite aesir or human either. She had prominent cheekbones, a round pointed chin, and full curled lips that almost met her small pointed nose. Her eyes were a bit too far apart to be aesir and too large to be human.

"Tolkien was right…" She couldn't help but breathe, "Elves are real." And not the creepy, mask wearing one's that were trying to steal the Aether from her either. Pretty, bright eyed, princess looking, woodland elves.

The girl was walking away, unaware of the Crown Princess marvelling the existence of her species.

"Oh! Excuse me!" Jane started towards the servant to ask for directions, but as soon as she stepped closer the girl's grey-green eyes flew wide and the she bolted like a frightened doe down the hallway.

"No! Oh--! Wait!" Jane called after the child. Had she scared her? Why was the servant scared? Most of the servants she'd met here were like Gertrude, open and friendly, unless they had been mistreated. Why was this little girl scared? Had someone hurt her?

Jane's eyes narrowed. After five years of hearing nothing but the worst of Thor's brother it was easy to jump to conclusions, and-- with questionable judgment, considering the child in her arms-- she gave chase in hopes that the poor girl might lead her to her master who was no doubt tormenting her. Righteous indignation surged through her veins. She was going to protect that girl. She gave chase.

After five minute sprint with baby Frigga bouncing at chest, Jane's breath had all but abandoned her. The elf girl was fast, too, she darted around corners and slipped through doors like she was the wind itself. Jane wondered breathlessly if elves were faster than aesir.

Suddenly as she rounded a corner the girl darted into a chamber. It was the only chamber in the hallway and the hallway wasn't in one of the living quarter hallways that Thor had showed her, but Jane could tell it was a chamber by the intricate lattice work around the frame of the arched doorway.

The door slammed shut and Jane hobbled over to it, gasping and pushing her hair out of her red and sweaty face furiously as she raised an angry fist to pound on the door.

It didn't occur to her that this might not even be Loki's chambers but, possibly, a complete stranger's, until after she'd knocked. She wrapped her arms more securely around her infant and felt an uneasiness crawl through her belly as she once again considered how poorly planned her actions were… but there was a young teenage girl who very well might be in danger and she couldn't just stand by if she suspected something.

The door swung open to reveal exactly whom she was looking for, in a state she was not prepared for. He was wearing a rough , green cotton tunic rolled up to the elbows and a pair of well worn black trousers. His hair was long and curly, pulled back from his face mostly by a ponytail holding the top half back. He was barefoot. She rarely even saw her husband this casual. It wasn't...princely…

"Jane?" Loki asked, in absolute confusion. "Is everything alright?" He looked behind her as though there might be a horde of dark elves at her heels. She hadn't even thought of coming to him in case of an emergency. She thought it interesting that he thought she might. He was a murdering monster, why would she come to him?

When she really thought about it though… she still didn't know many people that she trusted… certainly not any that could defend her… and Loki had saved her life twice on Svartlehiem. She tucked that bit of information away for later. If she deemed him safe, and not to be hurting the girl in any way, she might consider making Loki an escape plan for her and Frigga worst case scenario.

"Loki--" she started not at all sure how she was going to get the answers she wanted out of him. But then she noticed a bit of movement behind him. Loki was fairly broad shouldered, certainly more slender than Thor, but definitely broad enough to have hidden a person behind him. Specifically a very small, red-headed person.

Loki noticed her stare and shifted a bit to the side so she could see the servant girl, who fearfully ducked her head and hid behind a curtain of curls. Small, paper white hands clutched at Loki's shirttail as she hid behind her master.

Loki frowned, "Tevashala camu arús? " He murmured to the servant girl in another language.

The teenager nodded and tried to shuffle further behind him again. He didn't seem to mind her clinging to his shirt hem. He didn't even really seem to notice.

"Weh", The girl bit her lip and nodded.

"Were you chasing her?" Loki turned and frowned frowned at Jane.

She gaped at him like a fish out of water, "Wha- why- I- I w-was worried… she was scared and I-- I was worried about her... "

“So you chased her?” Loki raised that sharp eyebrow she’d only seen used on Thor and Odin. She felt a bit sheepish now.

“I…” She sighed, “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to frighten you,” She promised the girl. A large pair for grey-green eyes peered out at her, still behind the safety of her master’s shoulder.

“Resta us meh gurenti fara, jente.” Loki murmured wrapping an arm around the girl and gently pulling her next to him so she could see Jane. The girl shrunk into his side.

Jane was struck by how comfortable the servant was with her master… more than that, how comfortable Loki seemed with playing protector for the girl. She hadn’t seen behavior like this between the classes in Asgard… ever.

“Jane, this is Alannah.” Loki explained, voice still soft and gaze still trained on the frightened servant girl. “You’ll have to forgive her, she was simply startled by your… concern.” The bright emerald gaze snapped to hers and she could see the slight reproach there in the already asked, Why were you chasing her in the first place?

Jane felt like a child herself as she said, “Hi.”

She got a silent and shaky curtsy as a response.

There was an awkward silence for a few moments before the red-headed servant looked up at her master with a pleading expression and Loki gave an amused smile before nodding and letting the child escape under his arm and into the safety of the room that he guarded the entrance of.

“Well,” Loki cleared his throat uncomfortably, “Thank you for uh… checking on her... “

“I-- uh, yeah, no problem…”Jane gave an uncomfortable laugh and nervously began to rub Frigga’s back. Why had she thought this was a good idea? Why did she have this idea in the first place? “I-- uh-- I was actually looking for you…” she cleared her own throat awkwardly.

Loki looked at her dubiously, “Because…?” he asked.

“Constellations.” She blurted, pushing her book into his hands. He accepted it in surprise and still looked at her uncomprehending. I’m trying to find a way to spend time with you, you dolt, she thought, but she said, “You, uh, you mentioned they were, uh, good, and I was wondering if..well, Thor said you know things, like, I mean, lot’s of things, and well, I’m kind of branching out on my own here, since all my colleagues are you know, on a different planet and I was just wondering, if you had any advice or insight or uh...stuff..” She ended lamely.

Loki was looking at her like she’d grown a third head.

“Um...sure..”He finally said a half-a-beat to late. “I suppose… uh, I suppose you’d like to come in.” He looked over his shoulder with a sudden look of panic.

“Uh, I can come back later,” She started to back pedal quickly.

“No, no!” Loki opened the door all the way and gestured to her to come in, “I’m sorry, that was rude, it’s just that… um, I don’t get… visitors… Alannah, fruise! Irten ascha rusheh tyru!” He called into the chamber.

Jane gave a nervous smile and entered the lion’s den.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3
“Brothers and sisters are as close as hands and feet.”--Vietnamese Proverb
****

When Jane entered, Alannah was flitting around the room like a bird picking up half finished dishes and meals that had been littered around the room for varying stages of time. Loki swept a pile of books off an armchair and managed to pull the four remaining sheafs of paper off the armrests as well as gesture for her to sit with his foot, before spinning around and shoving them haphazardly onto a few various shelves. Then, Alannah and he were dancing around each other as they desperately tried to tidy the sitting room, which was for the express purpose of hosting guests, into a presentable shape to be seen by said guest.

There wasn’t much room to work with though, there were stacks of books as tall as Loki and folders of parchment crammed in inky scribbles stuffed every which way. Several mead mugs perched on bookshelves and there was even a few articles of clothing dropped around the room as though this were his bed chamber rather than sitting room. Said articles were quickly wadded up and disposed of immediately.

Jane suddenly felt a nostalgic pain in longing for her van as she remembered flying about her own place trying to shove dirty dishes in the cupboard and important documents in the fridge before realizing how ridiculous that was and pulling them out to shove in more reasonable locations when she had Thor over for the first time.

Loki and the servant girl seemed to communicate telepathically almost and when the room was presentable enough, Loki nodded at her and she nodded back before darting out of the room. Loki ran a hand through his mussed hair in attempts to smooth it down before retying the top half in it’s tail and offering her a sheepish smile that looked a bit nervous.

“I apologize again for the mess, I haven’t had a guest in…” His emerald gaze held a far off look in it before he ended, “in a long time… Can I get you something to drink? Coffee, tea, juice?”

Her mouth dropped open for the second time that morning. “You have coffee!” She hadn’t had a cup since last summer when Darcy visited and brought a 2 lb. emergency packet that had been gone in a week.

Loki smiled and called out after Alannah, “Alannah that will be two cups of Coffee then!” He sat down in an armchair across from hers and opened up her book with a small little smug smile.

“YOU HAVE--” Jane started again but hushed her voice when Frigga started to stir, “You have coffee!!!” How was this possible? All this time she’d suffered without, thought the delicious and mandatory comforts of late night studies were gone forever.

Did this mean all the cold mornings that she’d suffered at the breakfast table listening to Thor and Odin tear eachother apart, while drinking Asgardian breakfast tea, she could have been happily sipping away at a mug of steaming hot black coffee?

Coffee. Beautiful caffeinated silk, dark as midnight, rich as black hills gold. Good to know fours years into living here all it took to get a cup was to visit her estranged, city-smashing brother in-law who never left his room.

“Where did you get coffee?!” She exclaimed.

“Midgard, obviously.” Loki said with another one of those ridiculous smirks. If his expressions hadn’t been so tired she might have been more offended. He actually looked exhausted. His face was pale and unwashed and he had dark half-moons bruising beneath his eyes. She wondered suddenly if he’d slept at all since she’d seen him the night before.

“Midgard…” She settled back into her arm chair and gave him a couple of raised eyebrows herself. “Right… You just hop on a UFO and fly in to New York?”

“Oh yes, Captain Kirk’s Enterprise to be exact, and Mr. Stark himself makes me a cup every morning.” That earned him and incredulous laugh which he matched with a wane smile. She hadn’t realized he could actually be funny. Just funny. She’d seen sassy Loki, angry Loki (lot’s of that one), quiet sad Loki, murdering Loki and disapproving Loki. But funny Loki, that one was new. “No, I actually have a friend in Indonesia that I visit every couple of months. I’ve developed quite the addiction, I’m afraid.”

Jane frowned, “Addiction? I thought Aesir couldn’t be addicted to anything?”

“Uh, the amount of alcohol we drink should be an immediate dispute to that theory.” Loki pointed out with a twinkle in his eye but then the twinkle flickered and suddenly went dead, dragging this eyes down with it. “Although, no. Aesir aren’t normally susceptible to the effects of caffeine.” He left it at that and went back to looking at the contents of her book. “These first one’s aren’t…” He bit his lip, “exactly--”

“Oh the first one’s are total garbage,” she agreed. His shoulders decompressed a little bit of pressure at her admittance and she pushed it a bit more to try and get the science talk flowing, she could do science fluently. “I was running off a different solar time sequence because earth’s planet to sun rotation is--”

“A 365 day orbit, but of course, that makes sense...” he nodded tapping his lip with a long slender finger and flipping through the other pages, “And this one here? What is this equation? I don’t recognize it...” he offered the book back to her and pointed to one of her scribbles at the bottom of a sketch.

“Oh, that’s a basic formula for luminosity.” She explained, shifting Frigga uncomfortably for a moment while fumbling with a pen for a moment. Eventually the shuffle was pointless so she simply offered the infant to Loki who took her after only a moment’s hesitation and cradled her against his own side with a much larger hand.

With both hands free she took up a pen, tucked her hair behind her ears and began explaining the theory to him.

“If you know both distance and brightness of a star you can find the actual brightness, which we call ‘luminosity’ on earth…” she began.

Alannah brought them a whole kettle of steaming black coffee and a set of ornate green and gold mugs. Coffee and star-talk. She felt like she was home again.

Loki was a quick learner, and perhaps even a quicker teacher. The way he explained the complex formulas and equations was efficient and well practiced. She wondered if Prince’s had side jobs. Like, did they just go hunting and adventuring as young adults? That’s mostly what she heard from Thor, besides training and lessons designated for the Crown Prince… but Loki wasn’t the Crown Prince. So did he have other studies? Did he teach any? If he hadn’t then maybe he should.

She'd never seen some of this stuff in action before. Asgard had twice as many constellations visible by day as earth had by night and it wasn't because it was dark outside. Luminosity wasn't called actual brightness or Luminosity but rather was calculated by ray-length (also known as Fulimossi which had to be spelled out for her) measurable by an equation she only could understand half-of.

They spent hours at it. Arguing, comparing, explaining, learning and teaching. And within those few hours, discussing the heavens, sipping at full, warm, bitter drinks, trading Frigga between them or taking turns walking her about the room when she woke up and explaining theories to Alannah who'd somehow found herself in Loki's chair as he couldn't stay seated for too long anyways Jane found Loki working his way up the ranks of her approval from the worst of the worst to one of her favorite people in Asgard.

She'd never really realized how much she wanted a brother before.

He was brilliant. When Thor spoke of his brother's intellect, she'd seen it usually as a pity play. A 'I'm so good at everything, but really my brother has value too! See, he's smart!' But when Thor said intelligent, he really meant brilliant. If anything he was being modest about Loki's mind.

"You've had like thousand's of year to study this, right?" She asked, a tad insecurely as she gathered up Her new notes and he handed the squealing Frigga back to her so she could head back to her and Thor's chambers to nurse.

Loki gave a tired laugh and shrugged,

"Just under a thousand."

"So, you're Thor's younger brother right?" Jane asked to clarify, she couldn't actually tell which one was older or younger, but judging by Thor's overprotectiveness at times she was betting on the latter.

"What gave it away? His overbearing demands or my spoilt nature?" He grinned but each one was becoming more and more exhausted.

"A little of both?"She teased back, although in the back of her head she was noting that she didn't think Loki was all of that much spoiled. He couldn't even come to family breakfast.

He showed her to the door and hesitated.

"Uh, Jane." He called after her after a few moments hesitation.

"Yeah?" she bounced up and down in the hallway to try and quiet Frigga.

"Thank you." He nodded respectfully and she once again felt uncomfortable by his recognizing her rank as above his. Sure he was under house arrest for life or something… but he'd been a Prince longer than she'd been alive… Why was it that he was bowing to her or giving his seat to a servant girl? "I enjoyed our discussion…"

"Are you busy tomorrow?" she asked with a smile back.

"Uh…"He gave a dry chuckle, "No… no I'm not really the busy type anymore."

He must be bored out of his mind, she noted. "It okay if I come back?"

"Uh, yes… sure." He gave her another one of those looks like she'd grown a third head again and

she sighed. Shouldn't it be obvious that they at least try and enjoy one another's company? He was just as lonely as she was. And obviously just as smart.

"Great." she hoisted Frigga up again before pressing a kiss to her wailing baby's head. "See you then."

Getting home was easier than she thought it would be.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4
“Wish I could relive
Every single word.
We've taken different paths and traveled different roads,
I know we'll always end up on the same one when we're old,
And when you're in the trenches and you're under fire I will cover you”

“Brother” Kodaline
****

Thor was tired. So very tired he was having a hard time caring about the continued existence… of anything. He didn’t particularly care that the economy was floundering a bit in gold trading. Everything in Asgard was gold. Why did they need more? He didn’t really care that a new group was rising to fight against illegal slave trade. They’d risen up and fallen down for thousands of years and hadn’t made a difference. He didn’t really care that the Lord Volund’s daughter was to be scandalously married to someone far below her station. Lord Volund had twelve daughters, what did it matter that one of them was marrying someone they actually loved?

He really should care that the elves of Alfheim were pulling back from trade because of a realm-wide drought and depression, or that the gold economy was taking a slight dip, or that the illegal slave-trade was finally being fought a little again, but… he didn’t.

He was too tired to care. His father only pretended to care at this point, he was fairly certain. His mother was too dead to care. His wife was still basically a foreigner and didn’t understand much of what happened politically still, and his brother was too… he honestly didn’t know what was up with Loki. Maybe he was too damaged to care at this point.

By the time Thor had finished with his first full day of meetings and debates for the month of Grinúrcetóff he was so numb and uncaring he felt on the verge of tears. He’d never felt so alone in his own home before.

“My Prince,” Aenon, his dark-haired man-servant came over to speak to him during a recess, “Will you be dining with your wife tonight, or staying late again?”

Thor took a deep breath and glanced around at the Council who were scattered about the room in their various clusters still debating needless details of individual cases.

Thor didn’t have the talent for politics. To him right was right and wrong was wrong. All of these loopholes and tactics felt wrong even if they were necessary. Once again he wondered at how Loki would have handled the position of Crown Prince. Considerably better, most likely. Loki had a broader spectrum of how much deceit was acceptable.

Alright, that wasn’t necessarily fair.

Jane. He needed to focus on Jane right now. Was he going to eat with her tonight, or did his responsibilities require that he stay with the Council late?

“Yes, I think I will dine with Jane this evening, Aenon. In our private dining room, though.”

The man-servant bowed and nodded. “Very, well, my Prince.” Aenon stood and left to make the arrangements.

“Is the Prince ready to return to the discussion? Or shall we prolong this recess?” Lord Barthem inquired sarcastically with his nasally tone. He gave Thor a look that clearly expressed he thought that the call for a recess was highly unnecessary. Thor considered how long it would take him to pin the fat old man to the table, and decided less than a minute even considering his armed guard.

He sighed again as his brother’s chiding from centuries ago flickered through his memory.

“Fists should be a last resort, Thor. You can’t solve all conflicts like they’re war, you know.”

He missed that Loki. The young, gentle Loki who always had a quick smile and word of wisdom that rarely came from young men his age. The Loki who had a mischievous grin, sharp wit and danced through politics like they were a game instead of a task. The Loki who would jump a foot in the air and then burst out in a fit of laughter when Thor startled him, instead of flipping backwards out of his chair and drawing a dagger for being caught sleeping.

All he had left of that brother now was a bitter shell of a man who was quicker with blades than smiles and met opposition in arguments with a resigned silence; knowing he was beat in it before he began because no matter how sharp his mind or tongue was honed his rank and rights were so low now he didn’t even seem to think trying was worth it. With that sweet memory and bitter taste of reality Thor swallowed his temper and responded blandly,

“Yes, Lord Barthem, I believe most of us are ready to continue. Gentlemen?”

There was a chorus of agreement and the fat old lords started shuffling into their spot around the table. Thor watched them with bitter resentment and wondered numbly if he was going to end up exactly like the rest of them. His gaze flickered up to his father’s at the head of the table and not for the first time he thought about what a great man and warrior his father used to be.

And look at you now, Thor thought with a cruel bitterness, Fat, old, bored, and uncaring as the lot of them. I am going to end up like them, aren’t I? Just like you did.

“Recess adjourned,” Odin slammed the butt of Gungir against the floor and as it echoed through the chamber Thor felt a numb terror of its power, not for the respect he used to have, but for the fear of what power could whittle away from a man’s soul. What it would undoubtedly take from his.
****

By the time he had finished with cases Thor was late for dinner with Jane and his numbness had been replaced by a simmering rage. The old Lord’s of the Council had stopped discussing real politics and were laughing about the report the ambassador to Jotunheim had brought back about the state of the Jotun-people.

The surviving half of the planet were slowly starving to death and many had resorted to eating their own dead to survive. A madness had infected many of the frost-giant’s minds and the realm was in total anarchy. A half-starved, half-mad people scrambling over each other just to try and survive. When the report had begun Thor’s unspeakable rage had been directed at Loki who had burned the other half of the planet into oblivion with the Bifrost, but slowly that rage redirected itself to those in power, here at the table, instead of the prisoner prince with no rights.

“That’s what the brainless Veslingr’s get for focussing the heart of their planet into the Casket of winters!” One laughed.

“Idiots!”

“They practically handed us their own defeat, concentrating their power like that!”

“Like dogs licking their master’s boots! Dumb beasts!”

“The dogs are eating their own children! Disgusting!”

“Well, what do you expect? Their half evolved primitive creatures! Did you really expect and civility from them?”

“Maybe we should just finish them off. Rid the Realms of their filth…”

“Why bother? Why waste the mannpower if we could just wait for them to finish eachother off? Might as well let them clean up their own mess. Less bodies to deal with too, if they’re eating eachother.”

“Absolutely disgusting.”

“Filth.”

“Primal…”

“Savages, the lot of them.”

“You know they say Laufey was the only one intelligent enough to actually speak?”

“That’s probably why they worshiped him like a god. He was the smartest of the brutes.”

“God? Animals don’t have gods, don’t be ridiculous.”

Thor’s boiling blue gaze flickered silently between the speaking parties until they finally fell on Odin who sat impassively at the head of the table as though there was nothing interesting about the discussion.

'He’s not going to say anything.' Thor realized through his haze of rage. 'He’s going to sit here and listen to them call an entire species, Loki’s species, animals. They’re calling Loki an animal. A savage. A beast. And our Father doesn’t even care. Are you comfortable up their in your chair, listening to them degrade an entire society? You are, aren’t you?'

“Will Asgard send aide?” he finally snapped, unwilling to let another insult into his head.

“Aide?” Lord Remien laughed in a way that clearly expressed he was baffled by the concept. “Why in the the nine realms would we send them aide?”

“They are starving.” Thor bit out, desperately trying to swallow down the roar from his tone. Each word rumbled under the weight of his barely contained fury. “Will Asgard do nothing as an entire race slowly starves to death? When has this behavior ever been accepted?”

His questions were met with blank or quizzical stares and a moment of silence before a few confused chuckles rattled around the empty space.

Always. It’s always been accepted when it comes to Frost-Giants. Thor realized with a sudden souring in his stomach. He himself had accepted it until he’d been told of Loki’s biology. It had been hard to wrap his mind around, and he still struggled with the concept of Frost-giants being people, but that was him he knew now, not the Jotun people.

He was battling his own prejudice because he knew without a shadow of a doubt that the little boy

who used to toddle into his room to crawl into his bed with him as a small child was a person. The little trickster with bright eyes and a dimpled smile whose nose crinkled up when served carrots, was a person. The long, lanky youth who matched him blow for blow in the sparring ring was a person. And the young man who loved his wife and little child beyond life itself was a person. No shadow of a doubt there.

Therefore, though the perception was hard to move past, it was obvious to him that it was prejudice, and perception, not fact.

But here were all these old men, centuries too old for battle, all the same color, same nationality, same social status, same history, same gender, all sitting here around the table laughing at the idea of helping these starving people because they weren't people. They were animals.

And if he tried to prove that they weren't? If he revealed Loki's true parentage at this table, he wouldn't change their minds about the other race, he'd only change their perception of Loki from fallen prince to dumb brute. Odin's slight little smirk said that.

Loki. His brilliant, broken, little brother. They would demand to slaughter him like an animal… and Odin wouldn't stop it. Thor stood from the table slowly and a loud clap of thunder snarled outside, lighting the room up in blinding light for a moment and silencing the table instantly.

He noticed his father's grip tighten on Gungir and he couldn't hold back the sneer that worked its way across his face. 'So you'll defend this group of selfish blind old men but not your youngest son?' He wasn't sure why he was still surprised at his father's lack of care for Loki.

"I want to discuss what aide Asgard is willing to give the Jotun people." he put an emphasis on 'people' but he wasn't sure if it had any effect on anyone at the table. He'd have to word this exactly right if he wanted to get the desired effect.

Just think like Loki. He told himself… actually, he had no idea how Loki thought to be perfectly honest. He was fairly certain that Loki's synapses fired faster than the speed of light. Alright, just speak like him then. He relented. Mimic his brother? Now that, he could do.

"I am going to put the weight of my vote, which is worth more than half of yours combined, into the remainder of this single week of Grinúrcetóff being dedicated to finding a solution to how Asgard (as guardian of the nine realms) will respond to this immediate crisis. If the other half of you vote against it we will find ourselves at a stalemate to be decided by duel, which--" he gripped the table harshly, tendons and bones groaning under the weight of the tension dancing up his arms and across his shoulders. "--I certainly won't object to.

"However, if you agree that duel isn't the most efficient method of solving this vote, I want all options on the table including returning the casket of winters to them worst case scenario--" at the sudden reaction at the table he held up a fist to silence them with another intense display of power across the sky that rattled the floor beneath their feet.

"We stole the heart to their planet, which," he dared point an accusation at the Allfather, "could be identified by the Treaty of Guillriessa as a 'Crime against souls', which would definitely warrant our sending the Heart back if not punishment for the original council and king. However, if it is decided that Asgard can aide Jotunheim without returning the Casket of Winters, I will accept a solution of that nature.

"If anyone has any objections they may be brought up tomorrow in discussion but I will warn you that any argument based solely on prejudice or some childish excuse of Jotun's not being persons will not be tolerated.

"This is the royal council, everything discussed at this table should be proven by fact, logic, magic, and science. Not fairytales and fables you tell you're poor uneducated children at bedtime.

"Allfather, I'm grateful for your support in defending the nine realms in the past and trust you will continue to do so in the future. Thank you gentlemen, I will see you tomorrow and hope your solutions for aide are worthy of your positions at this table and in this Council.

Allfather." He gave a stiff bow to his father who was watching him with an unreadable expression and leveled a challenging glare on the rest of the Council. "Good evening."

And with a whirl on his heel, that snapped his cape and echoed in another growl across sky, the Crown Prince of Asgard left the table.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5
“I hear a roll of thunder
fear tryin to take us under
it's shaking everything now
sound off the sirens
we're in the fire
sound off the sirens
it's do or die”
“Sound off the Sirens” Sam Tinnesz
****

Loki was in the Library when the thunder started. At first he ignored it as a simple storm, and kept sorting through the selection of books he’d collected. There was one in here he thought Jane should read, she’d been so fascinated by the concept of Fulimossi and this one explained it so well. But then the thunder roared again and the very floor beneath his feet trembled and his head snapped up. That was not thunder. That was Thor.

Loki knew he was far from close to his brother anymore, but after 1,214 years of life with him he at least recognized the sound of his brothers storms. Low and distant storms, moaning and wailing were Thor’s sorrows. Nights that woke Loki up and he nearly found himself drowning in Thor’s storm of grief himself. He wondered if it was always Frigga Thor mourned…or if he mourned others.

With Thor’s excitement and anticipation came static that crackled through the air like electricity and made his hair stand on end. It’s one of the things that made Thor’s excitement contagious, in a very literal sense. How could one not get excited when the air around them was?

But these roars? These bolts of lightning so hot and bold that the ground echoed the sky’s trembling? Thor’s storms only took this sound when he was either furious-- in a blind rage-- or in terrible, excruciating pain. Neither one boded well.

Loki snapped the book closed and promptly left the Library.

Paying no heed to the servants along the hallway that sent him odd looks (He had entered the Library under the safety of an invisibility cloak so it seemed as though he’d spontaneously appeared from mid air) he called out to Thor’s signature power and chased it down to where it was quickly making its way across the palace grounds. He tried nonchalantly running a body-check on Thor as he strode down the hallways as casually as he could while still keeping up to the pace that Thor was making.

Good news was, after the sloppy body-scan from a distance, Loki was fairly sure that Thor still had possession of all his limbs… bad news was the storm outside was growing exponentially. Servants started flooding the hallways (he’d opted to take the servant pathways as usual, because the odd look of a servant was far kinder than that of a Council member), scurrying about trying to pull things in from the storm such as potted plants, balcony furniture and children before any of them got carried off in the wind. A wall rattled next to him and he tripped into a run as storm sirens wailed to life from the palace and out over the city. He slipped out of the servants pathways for a more direct route, and started to run.

The floor shook again, and Loki, sleep deprived and clumsy, stumbled slightly. Gravity continued

his forward motion and he collided with someone. That someone was half a foot shorter than Loki and had a much lower, much sturdier, center of mass. That someone won the collision and Loki ended up sprawled out on the floor. Mistake number one.

Almost instantaneously he'd flipped himself onto his back and was leaping to his feet when suddenly the golden tip of Gungir was leveled to his throat. He froze, eyes flickering up into the furious gaze of Odin Allfather, towering over him, mighty spear in hand.

"You!" Odin spat, face twisting viciously.

"Allfather…" Loki responded hesitantly. He was lost. He had no idea what was happening. Were they under attack? Why was the Allfather so quick with his weapon? Where was Thor?

A loud crash and boom answered his thought.

"You think you can turn him against me?" Odin snarled, pressing the tip of his spear into the soft skin of Loki's throat forcing the younger to lean further away. He swallowed and the movement against the blade broke the skin. Hot liquid painted down his throat.

"What have you been telling him?" Hissed the King.

"I don't know what you're talking about…" Loki knew it was the wrong thing to say as soon as it left his mouth, but he'd been so focused on the fact that one of the most powerful weapons in the nine realms was pressed to his throat-- a half and inch from his carotid artery-- and that it was sharp, that he really hadn't thought about which words he was going to use exactly. Mistake number two.

"Don't lie to me, you silver-tongued snake!" Odin roared. He had a way of yelling in such a low tone that no one beyond five feet of him would hear him and as Loki looked around desperately for witnesses there was no one in the hallways.

"What is happening!?" Loki roared back with as much strength as he dared, confusion and rage swirling through his chest with a sickening worry. "Where is Thor? What happened?"

"You're turning him against me." Odin snapped again.

"What?! How!? I don't even talk to him! Is he all right? What. Happened." Loki's response was as fast and unorganized as his pulse rate.

Odin's pale blue eye tore his face apart pore by pore looking for a single crack in his story. Loki remained stone still, staring up at his once-father with an expression frozen somewhere between confusion, anger and the wide eyed expression of prey. Hot blood trickled down his throat, the stream cold by the time it hit his shirt collar.

"Thor is fine." Odin finally said in his wise old fatherly way setting Gungir back down like a staff instead of weapon. Loki decided mistake number three would probably be to sit up, so he stayed down. "Simply overreacting to the frustration of the first day of Grinúrcetóff. We had a disagreement on a policy and his arguments were so absurd I thought you might influencing him."

"I wasn't." Loki promised, still frozen in place, heart thundering louder than the storm that rattled the palace.

"Good." Odin straightened his robe and turned away. "See to it you stay far from Thor, and Asgard's politics."

Loki just stared at him dumbly, numb and silent.

“Am I understood?” Odin snapped back around, Gungir half raised again. Loki flinched back like the coward he was.

“Understood.” He rasped.

“Good evening, Loki.” Odin turned on his heel and began striding purposefully down the down corridor again not even waiting for Loki’s quiet,

“Good evening, Allfather.”

As soon as Odin was out of sight, Loki let out a loud gasp and let his head fall back against the tiled floor. Heart cracking his ribs, he tried to regain control over his suddenly rebellious breathing-- he was not going to hyperventilate over this-- and almost felt like laughing when he realized that he was shaking.

He couldn't believe his own vulnerability. It was pathetic. He nearly lost his head worrying about a brother he didn’t speak to and then...well...almost lost his head again-- although this time perhaps literally-- to his once-called father who thought he was trying to hijack the kingdom’s politics from the position of a mere prisoner. He wasn’t sure if he was crying or laughing, at this point, but the ceiling he stared up at blurred with ridiculous tears and he kept producing these wheezes that sounded to be caught somewhere between a chuckle and a sob. Other that that, he lay perfectly silent in the middle of the hallway, shaking from an abundance of unused adrenaline because the king of all nine realms had almost just slit his throat. But he didn’t. Was that good? Or was that worse?

“Loki?” He heard Thor, before he saw him. His head just wouldn’t turn for the longest time and he was caught staring at the ceiling listening to Thor’s footsteps as they quickened to his trembling form lying recumbent on the hallway floor. “Loki? What happened?” Thor was kneeling next to him now and turning his head towards him, hissing as his fingers were smeared in Loki’s crimson blood.

That snapped the Second Prince out of his daze and he jerked away from Thor, scrambling to his feet and swaying only slightly as black dots threatened to rip his eyes from their sockets.

Thor grabbed his shoulders to steady him and then gently shake him.

“Loki, what happened? Who did this to you?”

Loki pinched his lips shut and shook his head.

“Loki! You can tell me! If someone has been hurting you, I would have you tell me--!”

The darker prince tore himself from light’s grasp and stumbled over to where the book on Fulimossi had slid halfway under a tapestry. Quickly snatching it up he shoved it into Thor’s hands when his much-too-physical older brother reached for him yet again.

“That’s for Jane.” Loki whispered still trying to calm his breathing with the storm raging inside his rib cage. “She was interested in the concept and I--” He touched at the crimson stain on his throat and stared at his stained fingers vacantly. “--I thought… that… uh… she’d enjoy that…” He wondered if his blood was actually red or if frost giants bled a different color. He'd killed so many and yet he couldn't remember.

Thor looked as lost in the world as Loki felt, but he hoped it didn’t show on his face as well as it

did on Thor's.

"Well… thank you… I'm sure she'll appreciate it…" Thor tried to gratefully accept Loki's rare attempt at reaching out but couldn't help the worry twisting his face up. "Loki, please! What happened? Who--?"

"I- I have to go." Loki muttered, "Good evening, Prince Thor." He started to bow but Thor caught his shoulders again.

"Don't bow to me, brother. Don't you ever bow to me again. I can't. I can't bear it." Thor grit his teeth so hard Loki could see the tension dancing up his jaw.

There was a moment of silence between the two as they stared into each other's gazes both wondering separately how much of the brother they used to know, existed in the current versions. Then Loki rasped,

"You'll get used to it."

Chapter 6

Chapter 6
“It's a cruel, cruel world
No mercy left, yeah it's a cruel, cruel world
It'll break your heart and burn you down, down, down
Don't ever doubt that it's a cruel, cruel world”

“Cruel World” Tommee Profitt

****

Jane was sick of this. Sick of being married to a Prince. She wasn’t sick of being married to Thor. Just his position of Prince. Playing Princess was not really her gig.

Thirty minutes after Thor was supposed to have come back to eat dinner with her, Jane went put Frigga down to bed. Forty-five minutes after Thor was supposed to have come back to eat dinner with her, Jane was rocking an already sleeping Frigga and crying. Sixty minutes after Thor was supposed to have come back to eat dinner with her, Jane was angrily shoving her own cold dinner down her throat and chewing aggressively while glaring the paint off the wall.

Seventy-five minutes after Thor was supposed to have come back to eat dinner with her, she got dressed for bed and sat on the still made up covers, alternating between crying and glaring. Ninety minutes after Thor was supposed to have come back to eat dinner with her, she heard the door creak open.

She slid off the bed and threw a wrap around her shoulders, stomping barefoot into the bathhouse where she heard Thor shuffling around. The door was open so she leaned on the doorframe as an obviously exhausted Thor cranked the faucet on and began to wash red from his hands. Jane straightened from her frustrated position against the door to reach for Thor’s large hands with her own smaller ones.

“What happened?! I thought you were in a meeting!” She gently turned Thor’s wet hands over to find where he’d been cut.

“It’s not-- I was in a meeting. It’s not my blood, it’s Loki’s.” Thor’s voice was low and husky and he was staring at something that wasn’t there, uncharacteristically pale.

“Loki’s?” Jane asked in confusion, “was he hurt?” Smart question, Jane. She rolled her eyes at her own stupid mouth. No, he’s not hurt, he’s just bleeding.

Thor didn’t seem to be paying attention to her slip up though and whispered, “He was just lying in the middle of the hallway. He was so still… just lying there staring at the ceiling. I don’t even think he heard me coming.” Thor’s voice was shaking and he was whispering as Jane washed his hands.

“Was he hurt badly?” Jane started patting her husband’s hands dry with a thick red towell. She tried not to think too much about the color of Loki’s blood on Thor’s hands.

“I don’t know.” Thor whispered. “It didn’t look like it.... He had a blood running down his throat though....”

“Throat?!”Jane looked up in concern, “It wasn’t, you know, the important vein or artery or

anything, right?"

Thor seemed to snap out of his daze a little bit to give her a wry smile, "Carotid artery? No, I wouldn't be back here if it was.... About a half-inch too far to the left…" His gaze went distant again and his voice went silent.

"Well, I'm not that kind of Doctor." Jane tried to lighten the mood a little but Thor was just staring at his now dry hands with that too pale face twisted in a thoughtful frown.

"Thor," Jane gently kissed the insides of both his wrists. "How about you try and sit down and eat something. Have you eaten?"

"What?" Thor's gaze dragged as he pulled himself back to the present.

"Have you eaten?" She repeated, tucking a lock of blonde hair behind his ear.

"Eaten?" he mumbled, then his eyes flew wide in realization. "Oh, no! I'm so sorry, Jane! How late am I?"

She laughed at how absurd her anger had been at his late return. He'd found his brother bleeding on the hallway floor. That was pretty much as good of an excuse as they got.

"It's alright, I ate without you and put Frigga to bed." She took him by the hand and began leading him into the dining room but he stopped to pick up a book on the countertop and hand it to her.

"What's this?" She took it in her left hand without letting go of her husband with her right.

"Loki asked me to give it to you." He shrugged. "It's about Fulimossi."

She looked at the beautiful hard bound book and shook her head, "He was lying on the hallway floor, bleeding from the throat, and he gave you a book for me?" She looked up at Thor, "Am I going to understand him if I get to know him?" She asked a little helplessly.

Thor cracked a smile and let a chuckle go that released a bit of tension from his shoulders, "I don't know. 1,214 years of living with him and I still don't think I will ever understand him."

"1,214?"

Thor nodded as they walked hand in hand into the dining room. "That's how old he is."

"So you're four years older?" Jane pulled the seat out for him and then sat down next to him. He picked up his fork to start eating. "How does that work exactly?" She set her chin in her hands, which always made him smile. He leaned over the table to kiss her and she smiled into him.

"Eat!" She pushed him back into his seat and earned a chuckle from him she could feel reverberate around in his chest cavity. He gave her a tired grin and snuck another kiss before settling back into his chair and picking up his fork.

"So how does that work, you being four years older? Were you like a toddler? Or were you just a baby still? So are you two like twins? Or are you definitely older?"

Thor held up a hand and swallowed with a smile, "Peace, woman! One question at a time!" he laughed.
Jane smiled sheepishly from where her jaw was cupped in her palms.

"We age as children on earth do until we reach our prime, so to speak, then we hold that age for

approximately 1500 years. After that we slowly begin to age again for another 1500- 2000 years. So I was four years old like an earth-child when Loki was an infant. Growing up I was four years ahead of him."

"So… Odin's the equivalent of like….3,000 years?" Jane raised her eyebrows.

"Yes… I'm not actually sure quite how old he is… we usually stop counting after about 2,500." He shrugged.

"So…"Jane frowned, "How old was Frigga?"

Thor's fork hesitated before coming up to his mouth, "Uh," Thor swallowed before glancing up at his wife, "Younger." He looked away before starting to eat again.

Jane raised her eyebrows, "Considerably?"

Thor sighed and looked so tired Jane regretted asking. This seemed to be as sensitive a topic as Loki. Which was saying a lot.

"My mother was considerably younger than my Father… she was actually his second wife… was… a...uh… my Mother was actually a war bride… She was part of a peace brokered between her people on Vanaheim and ours on Asgard after a century long war… Bor demanded that her father give her to Odin as..."

"A warbride…" Jane tried to process this new bit of information… Sometimes Asgard seemed so advanced and sophisticated… but other times they seemed as primitive as the century they seemed stuck in. War Brides? What kind of civilized society even did that anymore?

Thor dropped his fork and planted his face heavily in his hands with a pained sigh.

"When I was a child, these mysteries never troubled me. My brother was my brother. My mother my mother and my father…" His hands slid up to clutch at his hair harshly.

"Oh!" He groaned, "My father was a hero! I thought the world of him! And I thought my parents loved each other and my brother would always be my friend and I just… I just don't know if I believe any of it anymore." Jane slid from her chair and into Thor's lap folding his arms around her so he could bury his face in her shoulder.

He was shaking against her and his grip tightened like a vice. She ran her fingers through his hair and felt herself tearing up along with him. There weren't really any words of comfort she knew to offer. She was pretty sure Odin was no kind of hero, she wasn't sure what to think of the whole warbride idea and couldn't make a commentary on whether there was love in that sort of relationship, and as for Loki and Thor being friends? Honestly… she couldn't actually imagine that.

And that in itself was heartbreaking.

Thor's sobs started getting stronger and she whispered,

"Do you want to just go to bed?"

He nodded against her shoulder miserably and she helped him out of his armor and all its intricate knots and clasps. Her husband was still crying silently as they curled up in bed against each other and Jane held him against her as tightly as she could. It always struck her how even Thor felt alone here, and he had grown up in the realm.

“He wouldn’t even tell me who hurt him!” Thor gasped against her, massive frame shaking under the incredible force of his love, loyalty, and loneliness. “It could be anyone… or everyone… or…” he took another chest rattling gasp, “Or…just this one time, or it could be happening all-- the-- time...! he was just laying there Jane! And it was like Svartleheim and… and… he wouldn’t tell me who it was--”

“Shhh.” Jane murmured, pressing a kiss to his forehead and rocking him to sleep.

She couldn’t help but see the bitter irony that Loki couldn’t break Thor’s heart by fighting against him; but by not allowing Thor to fight for him when he needed it most, he broke his brother’s heart completely.

What a cruel world this was they’d found themselves in.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7
“ Oh, brothers! I don’t care for brothers. My elder brother won’t die, and my younger brothers seem never to do anything else.”– Oscar Wilde
****

Thor was quiet and thoughtful the next morning and it was driving Jane nuts. You’d think after four years on this God-forsaken planets of “gods” would have her used to it. You know the, “all is lost, might as well just eat lots, sleep lots and get drunk. We’ll live through the time, just wait it out,” sort of affect that the realm had on its inhabitants. She’d been watching it slowly chip away at Thor since they’d returned from fighting Malkeith.

At first she’d thought it was just worry and grief. His mother had just been murdered and he’d watched his brother get impaled; they hadn’t known at the time if Loki would actually recover, he barely survived the fevered infection that had settled in. Besides the point, their dad seemed to be descending into a crazy house state and Thor really, really, really, didn’t want the throne yet. She’d thought once they got through the first year, he’d recover.

But looking across the breakfast table at her husband, she knew that wasn’t true. Thor had recovered as well as Loki or Odin had recovered, which was to say, not at all. Once again she felt that ghost of a guilty pang in her stomach as she thought about how Frigga had died to save her…. If Frigga was still here Odin might be a semi-decent person, Thor would have a family and Loki… well… he’d still be Loki, but he’d have his mom still. Thor mentioned how close the two had been.

She knew logically it wasn’t her fault. Her blood literally contained a weapon of mass destruction and she was keeping it out of the hands of a terrorist by staying out of the fight. Besides the point, Frigga had free will and had volunteered to keep her safe. She chose to do everything and died a hero… Logically Jane knew it wasn’t her own fault, but sometimes, even four years later, she still felt guilty; especially when observing the three living family members erode individually around her without the goddess of love and destiny to keep them together.

Jane gave a heavy sigh and felt really, really old as she looked at her ancient husband who used to act jovial, boyish and happy instead of solemn, hopeless, and lonely.

“I visited Loki yesterday.” She tried for conversation.

That sparked interest at the very least into the pair of sad blue eyes across from her.

“Oh, and does he speak?” They smirked across the table at each other at a bit of light fun at Loki’s expense.

“He does, in fact!” She raised her eyebrows and took a sip of soup-- it was still weird to her that Asgardians ate soup for breakfast. It was kind of nice… but weird. “He takes a bit of a push, but once you get him wound up he can chatter away for hours.”

Thor looked genuinely surprised. “Hours? He hasn’t… not since…” he paused to think, “He hasn’t done that, I don’t think, since before the Bifrost…What on earth did you get him talking about?”

With a twinkle in her eye, Jane gave into the mischievous urge and teased, “Oh you know, we started talking about your nasty habits and he just couldn’t seem to find an end to them--”

“You didn’t!”

Thor threw a grape at her but she snapped it out of the air like a pro. Her husband laughed and crowed,

“Goal!” Throwing his arms in the air triumphantly as though that had been the intended purpose to start with. Jane threw a grape of her own a bit harder and it hit him square in the nose.

“Bullseye!” She pumped her fist in the air and they laughed for a few more moments.

“No but really,” Thor said, trying to reign the conversation back in. “Teach me your ways, wise woman!” He clasped his hands together as if in prayer. “How does one get the oyster to reveal it’s precious pearl?”

“Usually I just get impatient and start stabbing along the weakest point.” Jane shrugged, playing along with the metaphor, but suddenly Thor felt out of the game with a panicked expression.

“Did you just ask him about Sigyn and Nari right off the bat?!” Thor looked like he might be about to choke.

Jane frowned, “Sigyn and Nari?”

“His wife and daughter!”

“No! What kind of moron do you think I-- Wait, he was married?”

“Yes!” Thor sighed, putting his head in his hands. “Where did you think the child came from?”

“Scandalous affair?” Jane shrugged, trying to bring the light mood back. She was tired of seeing Thor tired. “A horse? I don’t know! We’ve got some weird myths back home.”

Thor cracked a wane smile at that and chuckled, “Oh, believe me I know. Loki developed the story about the horse himself and spread it as a rumor when we were on earth as early youths on a dare.”

It was Jane’s turn to choke, “He made that up!?”

“Indeed, my brother has quite the talent for telling the most outrageous tales and maintaining a straight face and he never backed down on a dare.” Thor grinned, sipping at his soup again.

“I don’t know if you could call that a talent…” Jane raised her eyebrows and took a sip herself.

Thor shrugged with another wry grin and noted, “They are…” his grin lessened a bit. “Were quite entertaining…”

“If you call fabricating a tale where you gender/species bend to birth a foal then, yah… pretty entertaining.” She decided to move on before Thor got caught up in how much of his brother he’d lost again. “We talked about constellations… well, I actually got him to talk to me at first because well… ahh,” she blushed.

“What?” Thor prodded, the smile back.

“I uh--, I may have had a misunderstanding with his servant girl… and uh, might have, sort of, chased her.. A bit… on accident.”

Thor laughed, “You accidently chased Alannah? You’re lucky all you got was a talking to, the last time Loki defended her the offender ended up in the infirmary.”

“Infirmary?”

“Yes, well,” Thor cleared his throat uncomfortably and suddenly found his soup quite interesting, “A young Lord’s son was er… making unwanted advances… uh, rather forcefully--”

“Like sexually harassing her?” Jane felt fury flare in her belly at the thought of anyone trying to hurt sweet, timid Alannah like that.

“Uh… yes…” Thor went another shade of red, “We don’t usually say it in so many words here…”

“Oh.” Jane blushed but didn’t apologize. Thor didn’t expect her to anyways.

“Anyways, Alannah has a magic tether to Loki so she called out to him when she… panicked… and well,” Thor scratched behind his ear with a mixture of pride and discomfort. “Loki, er, escorted the young man to the infirmary with a set of broken ribs and a fractured jaw.”

Jane gave a jerky nod. “Good.” Was all she said and they sat there in silence again for a long moment. She was starting to see why this version of Loki was so hard for Thor to get over.

“Thor, why are Alannah and Loki so…? I mean is it normal for Master’s to be so… protective of their…? I mean why is Loki so--?”

“Mmmm,”Thor shook his head to stop her from trying to correct herself again as he swallowed another bit of soup, “No, you’re exactly right. Loki is abnormally protective of Alannah, I suppose. Sigyn’s, his wife, people-- she was elvish-- assign companions to their royalty, and Alannah was Nari’s companion before--” Thor stopped talking and stared into his soup as though he’d lost something there.

“Before she died?” Jane whispered.

Thor shook his head and shut his eyes. “It’s still so painful, even now… I can’t imagine what it’s like for Loki… He… he loved Sigyn so much… and little Nari was his life.”

Jane stayed silent. Honestly she couldn’t imagine Loki as a family guy… but then again… she still didn’t know him to well. She knew him enough to kind of like him as a person, which was saying a lot considering he tried to take over her planet.

“Honestly… that’s where we started losing him, I think.” Thor was muttering. “No one knew how to comfort him after… after that.”

“After what?” Jane was trying not to be too pushy, but this was a lot more information than Thor had been willing to share the night before last.
Thor shook his head and gave her another tired smile, “No. He’ll tell you when he’s ready… if he’s ever ready.” Thor sighed again and gave up on his soup, but gave her a wry grin, “You’re a clever one Agent Foster.” He teased lightly. “You almost got it out of me.”
Jane frowned, soured by her almost victory. She very much doubted she’d be able to get it out of Loki if she couldn’t get it out of Thor, but she played along anyways,

“Well, I’m continuing my infiltration of your brother’s defenses today, so wish me luck.”

Thor stood and draped his cloak over his shoulders as he bent down to kiss his wife first on the mouth and then planted a sweet one on her forehead.

“What is the phrase you use? May the force be with you.”

Jane laughed and threw her arms around her husband’s impossibly broad shoulders kissing him back.

“You’re amazing!”

Only her husband, the alien Prince of a solar system who wore cloaks and drank ale and worked so hard to memorize her “midgardian customs” could give her this sort of joy. Only him.

Jane planted her hands on her hips as he left and muttered,

“Now, what to do about your prodigal brother.”

Maybe by finding someway to fix Loki, she could make Thor’s life a little bit easier.

“Fix Loki.” She sighed, “Yeah, piece of cake. Noooo, problemooo.” She’d earned three PhD’s. How hard could it be?

Chapter 8

Chapter 8
“Face down in the desert now there’s a cage locked around my heart
I found a way to drop the keys where my failures were
Now my hands can’t reach that far.”

“Brother” Needtobreathe

****

Loki had actually forgotten that Jane was coming again until she knocked on the door the next morning. He jerked awake at the rap on his door and was so distracted by a piece of paper was stuck to his face and he needed to get it off that he barely heard Alannah begin telling someone that he was not available this afternoon. He swatted at the paper viciously.

Wait, afternoon?

He gasped and bolted upright, where he sat at his desk, tipping a sheaf of paper off the table that took a vase with it. He lunged to catch the vase and succeeded, but only to trip on his own feet in a half-asleep deliria and land in a heap of limbs and uncombed hair with a loud thud.

“What was that?” He heard Jane ask and then heard the two women approaching.

Taking a single glance down at his rumbled, smelly, two-day worn-- not to mention bloody now-- clothes, and bringing a hand up to his pounding head that was covered in a black mass of curls and knots that was trying to suffocate him. He set the vase on the floor and desperately combed his hair back, muttering a weak changing spell to rid himself of the rumpled shirt and trousers set he was wearing and changing it for a cleaner pair. He did not have the time to make it to his feet, however before Alannah and Jane entered, so they found him, still blinking sleep from his eyes, sitting in the middle of his study’s floor with a vase in his lap.

“Master?” Alannah looked at him quizzically cocking her head to the side, “Why are you on the floor?”

Jane started laughing and Loki started at her silently for a moment, unsure of whether to be offended or not, but then he imagined what it must look like from a third person perspective and joined her.

Alannah offered a nervous giggle but wouldn’t go any further than that and kept nervously glancing between the two as if Loki might all of the sudden go straight faced and demand that Jane apologize for laughing at a royal family member.

He gave her a slight shake of the head, smile still planted securely on his face as he said, “Come on, jente, help me up, will you?” He offered her his hand and she grinned, throwing her whole weight into pulling him to his feet.

“Well, that was a most unusual way to wake up.” He noted, placing the vase back on the desk where it belonged. “Sorry, Jane, I really must be rusty on playing host, I seemingly forgot you were coming this morning-- uh, afternoon.” He smoothed out his tunic and gestured to a leather arm chair. “Although, the study is a probably a more suitable a place for our discussions anyways.” He shrugged, glancing around.

His study was a much more organized workplace than his sitting room, mostly because he had a purpose for it. The sitting room (since obviously not for guests anymore) was usually dedicated to day in, day out studies, the things he researched, read or wrote about, meals -- he still couldn't make himself sit in the empty dining room-- and whatever else he happened to decide to do for the day. It was a large melting pot for his ideas and studies.

His official study, however, was a well maintained room walled on all four sides by cedar bookcases that were ribbed with beautiful, hard bound books from all over the nine realms, in hundreds of different languages, neatly organized and kept in their places.

It was a smaller study than his old one, but all in all he'd thought he'd gotten a pretty good deal for his new, "this-is-where-I'm-going-to-hide-my-disgraced-second-son-who-isn't-really-my- son," set of chambers.

There was room for only one desk, so he'd taken Sigyn's because he just couldn't part with it quite yet, sentimental fool that he was. Sometimes, when the sunlight streamed thru the window to fill the room he could almost see her sitting behind the desk, long blonde hair in a thoughtless braid, framing her face like a crown of light, and sapphire eyes sharply focussed on a sketch she was breathing to life. You'd think five-hundred years and he'd at least be willing to part with a desk… maybe he was afraid of forgetting memories like that one.

"That's a beautiful desk." Jane caught his eye and he couldn't help but roll them. She was trying a bit too hard. He wasn't sure, quite yet, if her motive was charitable, sent by Thor, or just inspired out of loneliness, but she wasn't hiding it too well. She was trying to get to know him suddenly, for some strange reason, four years after she'd married his brother. Why she didn't want to get too close to him when she'd first entered their royally messed up excuse of a family was no mystery to him. He was guilty of waging war on her entire planet. He didn't expect her to try and like him.

Why now though? What had changed?

"Thank you." He brushed it off, not wanting to give too much of his weak sentiment away on the object. Sentiment was weakness, and weakness got you hurt. Or maimed. Or killed. Or worse, the only one left alive.

"Alannah, would you brew us another pot of coffee? I assume you'll be wanting coffee?" he clarified with Jane.

"Yes, please!" Jane begged. Was she almost to tears? Over this? He smirked.

Alannah nodded respectfully but hesitated on the threshold and gave him the largest set of puppy-eyes, next to Thor's, that existed on Asgard. He rolled his eyes at her and shooed her out but immediately after her departure, he turned back to Jane and obliged Alannah's silent request.

"Jane, would you mind if Alannah joined us again?" He began reorganizing the papers atop the desk that had been scattered about in his waking fit.

"No! Of course not." the once-mortal smiled, "She's pretty curious about stars, isn't she?"

"Indeed she is," Loki smiled to himself. "Stars are sacred to her people. I like to try and teach her everything I can about their culture… unfortunately most of what I can give her is merely head-knowledge." Sigyn would have been able to teach her the soul of the culture.

"I'm sure she appreciates it." His sister-in-law tried to encourage him. He snorted, she was nearly as clumsy with encouragement as Thor was. Nearly… not quite that bad though. Thor probably

would have said something along the lines of,

“Don’t worry yourself over it, brother! This is the only culture she’s ever known! Why would she need a second?” Well intending oaf.

“Did Thor get you that book?” He changed the topic from Alannah.

“Yeah!” Jane’s small brunette head nodded enthusiastically and she shuffled Frigga around as she pulled the book from her stachel. It looked like she had some of her notes from earth in there as well on the Midgardian spiral-bound notebooks. Frigga started crying.

His fingers itched to pick the infant up, to hold her close and walk her around, but he swallowed down the impulse and let Jane try and open the book as well as attempt to rock Frigga back and forth.

He picked up a set of books to shelve instead. The crying intensified.

“Here,” Jane sighed and stood up, “Would you mind taking her? I had a specific equation that I wanted to ask you about, and I need to find where it was...”

He didn’t need to be asked twice. Immediately he set the stack of books down and opened his arms to accept the little one. He knew better than to ask, but he wouldn’t ever turn down the chance to hold her. Frigga’s little face twisted up in frustrated fury at the rude shuffling as her mother began flipping thru her notes and comparing them to the book. Loki hushed her, bouncing her across the room as he shelved the remaining books one-handedly.

Slowly the wails softened to sniffles and the delicately lashed lids, screwed shut tight against the unfairness of whatever it was she was crying for, popped open to reveal a pair of round, bright blue eyes that peered up at him curiously. Thor’s eyes.

“Well, good afternoon, little one.” he smiled and pressed a kiss to her soft little forehead discreetly while Jane was enthralled in her notes. Frigga started sniffling again.

“No, no, Sh, sh, shhh.” he started swaying back and forth as he pushed the last book into place, “You’re alright…”

“I found it!” Jane popped up and came over to him, “See? This equation uses this symbol to represent gravity? Right? But gravity doesn’t work like that.” She braced a notebook against the bookcase in front of her and began scribbling out a similar equation. “If this equation were correct, there’d have to be a black hole straight down the center of the universe.”

“Yes?” Loki nodded, with a quizzical look. He didn’t stop swaying.

“Yes? What do you mean, yes? If there’s a black hole in the middle of the universe, everything should be being shoved out, like blown to bits, not pulled in…” He smiled as she puzzled through it. “Unless the process was slowed down… like crazy exponentially… but that wouldn’t make any sense… black holes don’t slow down.”

“Unless an outside force slows them down.” Loki shrugged gently, patting Frigga’s little back as she hiccuped a worn out sigh.

“What, are you talking about God or something?” Jane’s eyebrows hit her hairline and Loki chuckled.

“We’re still not entirely sure what we’re looking at with that particular anomaly. There does seem

to be an external force that's preventing it from collapsing in on itself and dragging the universe in with it, though. There's an unprecedented amount of magic around it too--" he kept swaying and held Frigga in his left arm while using his right to throw up an illusion for Jane to see, adding color to where the magic could be seen tethering around the gaping hole. "We call it the tree of Yggdrasil. The force of it's pull are what keep the nine realms aligned."

"Thor told me a little about it." Jane nodded, biting at her lip in concentration. "But I thought it was just a way of measuring, or describing the universe…"

"Well that's the basic interpretation, but it is also a fixture, of sorts, in space. Without it the forces are too powerful on their own, chaotic. But because of Yggdrasil the nine realms orbit the "trunk" so to speak. Without it they'd collapse in on themselves."

"Okay…" Jane squinted as though it might help her understand better. "So… that would mean-- if this gravitational pull really is stable, which is just....impossible--" she stuttered, "That would mean that Yggdrasil would have it's own… very different gravitational pull… do we have an equation for that?"

"We have equations, " Loki nodded running his fingers along the spines of his books as he searched for one in particular. "Ahh, here, take a look at this one." he pulled 'Reidsson's Third Volume of Yggdrasil's Theories: Proven and Accepted', and flipped through the table of contents to find the section on mathematical equations and gravity.

"There, this is a chapter on equations that have been proven, or are at least accepted mostly by scholars… I appreciate that he pays as much attention to the laws of magic in the equation as he does the other scientific laws like gravity. He's got a few interesting perspective of reality and religion, but, I think that makes it all the more fascinating." he shrugged and handed the open book to Jane who immediately began devouring it.

Frigga gave a content little coo and he glanced down to notice she'd slipped into a nap in his arms. Sweet, little one. He couldn't help the small smile tugging at the corners of his lips as he noticed she pouted in her sleep with the same expression as Thor. He marveled at the perfection in her round face and the feel of her fresh, baby soft skin. This child was half Thor… and half of the genius mumbling to herself next to him as she deconstructed an equation. He didn't think he was ever going to be able to stop marvelling.

He remembered marvelling at Nari in the same way with a sharp pain. Sigyn's crystal blue eyes, wider and rounder than Aesir, a head full of thick black curls even at birth. Perfect little fingers with a mighty little grip… tiny pointed ears, human sized with an elven curve.

The image of a bloody toddler's hand flickered in front of his vision and he jerked himself away from the other memories. The cold, wet memories of tears and blood and screams-- He couldn't breathe.

"What's this symbol--?"Jane stopped, "Oh, look at that…" she smiled, "You've put her to sleep."

Present. He reminded himself. Stay in the present. You are with Jane. You are holding Frigga. Thor's child. Focus on the present.

"Yeah," he attempted at smiling. Failed miserably. "I have a habit of doing that."

"You okay?" Her voice was unbelievably gentle and he felt like cursing his expressive face in every language he knew.

Alannah saved him, “Here’s the coffee.”

“Good, thank you.” he focussed on smoothing out his syllables and ironing his expression again. “Jane wouldn’t mind at all if you stayed with us again, jente.” he added with a fond smile at the girl as they settled down, Alannah and Jane in the two armchairs and himself on Sigyn’s desk, kicking a leg back and forth gently as he tried to avoid tightening his grip around Frigga protectively. Present. He told himself. Stay in the present. Focus on the present. You are here. Not there. Don’t you dare hyperventilate over this. “And Alannah, feel free to ask Jane or I any questions, we don’t mind explaining it to you. It’s not considered rude on Midgard.”

Alannah blushed and sent Jane a shy smile.

Present. Stay in the present. Alannah is the present.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9
“Hey brother! There's an endless road to rediscover
Hey sister! Know the water's sweet but blood is thicker
Oh, if the sky comes falling down, for you
There's nothing in this world I wouldn't do”
“Hey Brother” Avicii
****

Thor could not believe that Loki’s chambers had been moved. After the second day of sitting through Grinúrcetóff meetings, Thor was tired and frustrated and angry and this was really the last thing he needed; especially while carrying a stack of this many books. His brother didn’t even live where he used to, he lived halfway across the palace, apparently. Why on earth was the servant leading him down this corridor? These rooms where the storage rooms, no one had lived here since his grandfather Bor reigned.

“This one, my Prince.” The man-servant bowed and gestured to the door. It looked like a royal chamber door, but it was sloppily done. The protective runes were obviously redone several times. Thor peered at the very edge of the door frame to find Loki’s small, neat rune-script surrounding it, writing his own protective spells that were no doubt far more efficient and reliable.

“Thank you,” Thor nodded to dismiss the servant and placed a hand on the door to open it. The runes flashed an angry red and he felt the door lock. He frowned and squinted at the runes before rolling his eyes. “Very well, brother.” He set mjolnir down outside the door and tried again. This time, the runes hummed a vibrant green and the door slid open soundlessly.

Thor wasn’t sure whether to be offended that his little brother had warded his chambers against his hammer, or grateful that Loki didn’t ward the chambers against him. He was too nervous and tired to care. He felt like every fiber of his brain stem was short-circuiting.

Loki’s sitting room was… a disaster. Chaos written in the language of a curious genius with too much time on his hands. Thor was just glad he was keeping busy and not wasting away in a catatonic state of depression.

He heard the voices of the two smartest people he knew marbling into an intense state of disagreement the next room over and trodden over to the study door. He stood silently in the doorway and smiled tiredly at the sight that met his eyes.

Loki, of course, knew that he was there and gave him a look he didn’t really have the energy to try and interpret it. Jane sat with her back to him and her attention was completely submerged in the debate-- never having had to acquire the state of awareness that centuries of battle and trauma had taught his brother--- and didn’t notice his presence as she gestured wildly with her hands, a dark blush emphasising her point as she adamantly exclaimed,

“--no! No! You can’t just throw the laws of physics aside! That’s just---! Uhhh! There has to be an order! A reason!”

“Certainly, but just accepting that there are rules we don’t know yet is absolutely necessary to maintain the hypothesis that--” Loki began.

“Oh! Bull--” Jane glanced at Alannah who was sitting facing Thor with a look of dazed confusion

and mild panic that the two were arguing. “--poop.” Jane finished after a dramatic pause and stare at the youth. “That’s just a hypothesis! And not a very good one at that--” Jane jumped right back in.

“I’ll have you know that I developed that hypothesis myself and it’s been approved by--”

“By some alien council, I know!” Jane brushed his defense off with and angry wave of the hand. “But your little chaos theory is just a theory… and a narcissistic one at that!”

“Narcissistic?!” Loki did look mildly offended at that, but he hesitated on the rest of his rebuttal when little Frigga started whining in his arms to stand up and begin bouncing lightly in place. Frigga calmed a little and Loki dove straight back into the conversation. “Where in the nine realms did you get that solution?”

“You’re literally the god of Chaos!” Jane slapped her hands down on the armrests of her chair emphatically, “Of course you want to be above the laws of physics!”

“I was stripped of my titles in all but prince--” Thor winced, “and there are millions of creatures that are above your so called “laws of physics” on one of the smallest, most insignificant mortal planets in existence! You think mjolnir obeys the laws of physics? What about the Allfather? Do you think he’s confined to the laws you and your people have made based off of what you know about only your singular planet, when you didn’t even know the rest of the nine realms existed six years ago?!”

“No! Buuuuullllpooooooop! You do not get out of this by just making fun of my planet! Nooooo!” She shook her finger at him aggressively. “The laws of physics are in place for a reason. You can’t just deny science.”

“Why not? You’re just denying the existence of magic.” Loki shrugged dramatically.

“Okay, first of all magic is not magic, it’s just science we don’t understand yet--”

“Ah hah!” Loki pointed at her, “So you admit there’s concepts you don’t understand yet. Therefore the my refined chaos theory is a totally viable approach to--”

“No! No!” Jane jumped to her feet, “You can’t just deny the law of conservation of momentum--”

“Of course you can if you use--”

“I’m sorry to interrupt,” Thor cut in, “But Loki would you mind if I hold my daughter. It’s been an awfully long day. Besides the point, Alannah looks like she might be about ready to faint.” He set his stack of books down on the desk, Sigyn’s desk he realized with a pang.

Jane snapped around, surprised to see Thor there, and Loki sent him a scathing glare as he handed the infant over but was already checking on Alannah by the time Thor had his little angel in his arms again.

“Thor! Hi!” Jane turned a deeper shade of crimson and squeaked, “How much of that did you hear?”

“Enough to know that Loki is breaking all the rules in both of our realms and that you are rather upset with him.”

“I was afraid she was going to hit him.” Alannah muttered meekly almost to herself.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” Loki shrugged pouring himself a cup of cold coffee. “Thor, did it ever occur to you that your wife might be very caffeine deprived in our realm?”

Thor glanced at Jane in surprise. “No, I suppose I never thought… you never mentioned-- of course you shouldn’t have had to… I’m sorry Jane, I guess I didn’t think of it.”

“Of course you didn’t.” Loki snarked, but his expression held a bit of the old Loki in it. The teasing little brother who ran his mouth too much. Thor wouldn’t shut down any glimmer he got of him.

“Actually, I was coming to ask a favor of you Loki-- by the way, when were you planning on telling me you’d moved halfway across the palace? When did that happen?”

Loki raised his classic knife-thin eyebrow and actually stopped the mug halfway up to his lips. “Uh… four years ago. I was moved here as soon as I was well enough to leave the healing chambers after Slvartleheim.”

All the way back when…? “So all those times I poured my heart out at your door, begging you to let me in, you…?!” Thor felt a little like his brain had been flipped upside down.

“Nope.” Loki cleared his throat uncomfortably and took the sip of coffee. “Wasn’t there for any of that…”

Thor felt really stupid and really angry all at once. Partly at himself, partly at Loki for... Well it wasn’t really Loki’s fault was it? He was acting like he thought Thor had known. Thor should have known. Someone should have told him. Mostly he was angry at the Allfather. His dear, dear father who was becoming more and more revealed in his prejudice against his youngest son’s species. Thor wasn’t sure if he needed to sleep or cry. Maybe both. Last night hadn’t been too bad.

“Alannah will you give Prince Thor the chair?” Loki’s voice was quiet and not mocking at all. Thor looked up in surprise and then noticed that Loki was swaying… no Loki was standing still… the world was swaying. He was so tired. He shut his eyes tightly against the exhaustion and gave a heavy sigh, waiting for the spinning to stop.

He felt Loki’s hand on his arm. It had been so long since he’d felt his brother’s touch but he’d recognize it anywhere. He opened his eyes and somehow Loki was in front of him and glaring at him.

“Are you sick? Injured? Did you hit your head? Does this have to do with the storm yesterday? Sit down, if you pass out you’ll crush Frigga.”

Thor shook his head, the world really was upside down, Loki didn’t care if Thor was well. Loki didn’t care about anything anymore.

“I’m not going to pass out, I’m just tired.” he sighed, but let Loki glare him into the seat.

Jane came and perched on the arm of the chair and he let his head fall against her side. She kissed the top of his head and threaded her fingers through his hair.

“What’s wrong, Thor?” she sounded worried too so he sat up straighter to convince the two that he was fine.

“Nothing,” he promised. “Nothing is wrong. I’m just tired, and frustrated with… everything, and stressed. I’m just very stressed.”

“What did you eat to day?”

Thor raised his eyebrows at his brother's uncharacteristic worrying and tried to figure what his angle was. Loki's face was as angry, cold, and impassive as ever though as he demanded,

"Thor what did you have to eat and drink today? You're as white as a piece of paper."

"I'm not--" Thor snapped, but quieted when Frigga began to whimper. He sighed, "I'm not injured, or sick, or hungry. I haven't eaten since breakfast, but that's only because I'm wound too tight and I'm afraid I won't be able to keep it down. It's just going to be a stressful month."

"Yes…" Loki mused, perching himself on Sigyn's desk and kicking his left leg absently, "Grinúrcetóff usually is. I heard you and the Allfather were at odds."

"From who?" Thor glanced up at him dubiously.

Loki shrugged. "A fairly reliable source." he took another sip indicating Thor was not going to get a name. Slippery snake. Somethings never change. Loki might even very well be aware of all the happenings in their meetings. It wouldn't be below him to gossip with servants or eavesdrop himself.

Thor groaned and let his head fall back against the back of the chair. Frigga started crying and he seriously considered joining her.

"I need to feed her again," Jane kissed Thor on the temple apologetically and took the infant from him, "Loki, is it alright if I sit in the dining room again?"

Loki nodded distractedly to his sister-in-law and told Alannah in elvish,

"Yurei seta un grupit dei dasrhen, jente?"

Alannah nodded and scurried off past Jane who picked up a thick book to continue reading while she nursed and slipped out into the dining room. Only the two brothers remained, Loki looking both suspicious and uncomfortable and Thor staring at his now empty hands and continuing to try and hold back tears. He couldn't even pinpoint exactly why he wanted to cry. He just did.

"It's kind of ironic that you can handle mortal combat without blinking an eye but are falling to pieces over Grinúrcetóff." Loki informed him with that single, knife-thin eyebrow stating his disapproval.

"Yes, well some of us panic over the sight of blood and other's of us don't like politics, so I guess we're even." Thor snapped. Loki flinched and Thor felt like he'd just swallowed an iron. Had he really just said that outloud? Had he really just compared his own stress to Loki's trauma? As Loki's expression went cold and blank again Thor cursed himself for his stupid brain, and stupid mouth, and stupid heart that was torn in half when it came to Loki. Oh, he could be so dense sometimes!

"Loki, I'm so sorry, I didn't--"

"Stop." Loki snapped back, emerald gaze blazing in the heat of some awful memory. Thor remembered the little child Loki used to be, the one who cried when Sif and Fandral killed his pet frog he'd adopted ten minutes prior, He remembered the adolescent Loki who threw up after his first kill and didn't eat for a week. And he remembered the young man Loki holding a bloody toddler in his arms and screaming in such agony and panic he had torn his vocal chords and couldn't speak through his swollen throat for a month. The inhuman expression that was twisted on Loki's face then was forever seared into Thor's memory, as was the bone breaking sound ripping free from Loki's vocal chords.

“Loki…” The tears finally started, “I truly didn’t-- I’m sorry!” He buried his head in his hands ashamed to be the one who broke down. It was always him who broke. Apparently four years of separation hadn’t done anything to change that fact. Loki remained silent.

Thor heard Alannah come in quietly and exchange a few soft words with his brother in elvish again and then her quiet footsteps recede again. He took a deep breath and swallowed the tears again, running heavy hands down his face before dropping them uselessly in his lap.

A steaming mug of broth was thrust into his line of sight and he jerked back in surprise.

“Just drink it, you fool.” Loki snapped, but he sounded more exhausted than angry now. “It should be easy enough on your upset stomach.”

Thor bit his lip against more tears again and accepted his brother’s thoughtful gesture. He didn’t dare refuse it.

The broth was warm, and salty, and felt good on his anxious stomach. He took a few small sips and paced them with steadying his breathing back to normal. This had not gone as intended.

“What are these?” Loki reached for the books he’d brought and Thor felt sharp panic rise up his throat and he thought he might lose the broth after all as he said,

“Wait, Loki--” he surged to his feet, hissing as hot broth splashed down his forearm.

Loki read the first title, Jotun Anatomy, and Thor knew it was too late. He had wanted to ease into the conversation. Instead all he’d done so far was mock Loki in return for his rare kindness and then drop him head first into the topic of his biological heritage. Brilliant. He held his breath cringing as he watched rage light Loki’s eyes and his pale, slender hands begin to tremble.

“What is this Thor?” his voice was deceivingly calm, but the storm followed in the next, “What. The. Hell. Is. This.” A muscle along his viciously sharp jaw jumped angrily.

Thor ran a hand over his face and muttered, “This wasn’t how it was supposed to go…”

“Answer me!” Loki hissed, gripping the book furiously.

“It’s not what you think--” Thor started, but he was stopped when Loki leaned in close to his face, fury twisting his expression into something feral as he growled,

“Don’t pretend to know what I think.”

Loki wasn’t going to listen to anything he said, that much was obvious to the Crown Prince, so instead he leaned over to grasp the report the the Ambassador had brought back from Jotunheim and offered it to his brother still quaking in rage.

Loki snapped it from his grasp and opening it jerkily. His expression was carefully guarded and blank, but for his signature scowl, but Loki’s posture spoke enough for him. Slowly he backed off from Thor, and his shoulders dropped under thousands of pounds of silent weight. He leaned back against the desk and dropped the report back down to his lap halfway through reading it. When he looked back up at Thor his eyes were filled with death and grief.

“Why did you bring this.” He whispered.

“I didn’t bring it to hurt you,” Thor shook his head, “Or remind you of… what you did… I…” he sighed, “Loki, you know I say all the wrong things, please just hear me out and tear me apart after

I've finished?"

Loki gave a small nod, like his head was too heavy to move.

Thor took a deep breath of gratitude and started to explain.

"The Jotun people are in distress, and the Council… doesn't want to send aide." Thor glanced up at his suddenly very old looking baby brother who didn't look surprised in

the slightest. "I've cast my vote that this entire week be dedicated to finding a way to send aide and they have grudgingly agreed to go along with it to avoid a duel." His fist clenched wishfully. "However, they're plans for aid are… sorely lacking. I need a good plan. I need the numbers to work out. I need to know what they need for survival and how much we can do to help them set up a functioning government again without playing puppeteer. But the majority of the council want either to play puppeteer or wouldn't mind the extinction of the entire Jotun species. I-- I came to you because I know what's right and I want to do it, but I don't know how to do it. I came to you because I don't trust anyone to get the numbers and politics right. So if you're willing, I was hoping you might help me develop a method to feed the Jotun people, and help set up a diplomacy plan." he stopped to gauge Loki's reaction.

There was silence for a full minute.

"You… came to me because of… my expertise in strategy and diplomacy... ? Not because I am…" He didn't finish the thought and looked at Thor like the question was a test. Thor didn't look away as he said,

"Loki, I know you are Jotun. I also know, whether or not you return the sentiment, you are my brother. Those are equal facts. I don't deny your heritage or think it evil, just as I don't deny you are my brother and I love you.

As for the reason I came to you about this, yes. I came to you for your expertise, not your heritage."

There was another minute of silence before Loki, eyes flickering like unreadable, glittering glass asked tonelessly,

"And you feel comfortable coming to ask this of me, bringing me into Asgardian politics, even though I am guilty of 'crimes against souls' and am a prisoner of Asgard for the rest of my life." Thor flinched and hesitated to respond. There was something else, behind that question. Something that he didn't quite understand. Something was spinning in Loki's head that he couldn't quite grasp, and it frightened him a bit because he didn't know the consequences of whatever Loki was thinking. But…--fates help him-- he trusted Loki. There had been four years of silence between them and Loki was so tired and lonely, and Thor was as well… and he trusted Loki. He wanted to.

"Yes." he nodded firmly.

Loki tipped his head back to look at the ceiling as though deep in thought, revealing the still healing cut across his throat. Finally a bitter smile tugged at the corner of his mouth and he shrugged and offered a sigh with a quiet,

"Well, I've definitely done worse." He stood up and began going through the books as though it was decided, but Thor was still frowning now at his brother's back. What did that mean? 'I've definitely done worse.'? He wasn't doing anything wrong by helping Thor. He was banned from being a part of the Council and many of his rights, but developing a plan for Thor's own political

push was totally viable.

Loki rubbed at his neck unconsciously and Thor suddenly had an unexplainable sick sensation in his stomach. There was no reason for it… Loki didn't seem to notice, or appear any more anxious that usual. It was probably nothing… but…

"Hey," Jane came back in and glanced between the two brothers, "Everything okay?" she frowned.

"Absolutely." Loki said without hesitation, settling behind Sigyn's desk and beginning to scribble notes down on a piece of parchment paper as he read out of a book, already completely engrossed in his project.

"Okaay…" Jane didn't look convinced and Thor tried to hide his sudden and unexpected enigmatic feeling.

"Yeah, we're fine." Thor smiled a bit at Frigga who rested against Jane's shoulder, "Can I burp her?"

Jane grinned and eased her over. He missed his little girl these long days listening to old men argue and fight. He gave another glance at Loki to try and decipher whatever it was that had happened there, but his brother was already submerged in his task, flipping through books, scribbling down solutions and equations, and muttering to himself. It would probably be best to leave him undisturbed.

Jane seemed to follow his line of thought telepathically and gathered up her notes and a few of Loki's books she'd been looking at. She held them up to Thor with a questioning glance and he smiled and nodded. Loki loved sharing his books… as long as he got them back. His friendship was almost always lost when he didn't though. Jane slid them carefully into her bag and the three slipped out hand in hand.

Loki's distracted voice called, "I should have them ready by tomorrow morning."

Thor frowned, "Will you sleep?"

There was no response.

He sighed again and didn't bother to investigate further. Loki would do very well what Loki pleased. Jane gave him a knowing smile and started pulling him out through the sitting room. Alannah appeared seemingly out of nowhere to show them out and let out a surprised squeak when Jane wrapped her up in a hug goodbye.

Thor and Jane left hand in hand and Thor tried to convince himself that all would be well. He trusted Loki… so why was he feeling so… off? Only time would tell, he supposed.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 10
“When you close your eyes, what do you see?
Do you hold the light, or is darkness underneath?
In your hands, there's a touch that can heal
But in those same hands, is the power to kill
Are you a man, or a monster?”
“Man or Monster” Sam Tinnesz

****

Loki finished at three in the morning, and by six he had checked all of his work and double crossed his references.
“...stay far from Thor and Asgard's politics.” echoed forebodingly through his thoughts as he worked. Odin would have his head for this, most likely, but Odin was looking for an excuse to have his head anyways. He almost had it taken off for no reason already. Giving him a real reason didn’t really change anything. He was a dead man walking twice over already. He wasn’t worried. What was the worst that could happen? Execution? It might be a relief.

By studying the Jotun anatomy he was able to discover what forms of food would best nourish the frozen blue bodies and was surprised to find that most of their energy producing foods weren’t high in protein, they were high in vitamins and minerals. He thought that particular interesting considering the fact that most of the tales the Aesir told about the frost giants involved them eating raw meat; sometimes off the bones of living prey. He sighed. He supposed that explained why he’d actually discovered he’d had more energy when he went vegetarian.

Study of the planet showed him what plant life grew there and the closest things the Aesir had in comparison. By selecting the specific genes from the Jotun-plant life that withstood low temperatures and high wind speeds and working out a formula that spliced those genes into aesir plants.
Within six hours he had developed a formula for three grains, fourteen vegetables and seven fruits, prioritizing the vegetables because they were high in fiber and both minerals and the required nutrients so that, even though it would be bare minimum, it would be enough to not only to keep the remaining of the species alive, but eventually build up their strength and help them thrive. He triple checked the reproductive properties of the plants to make sure that they would flower and seed annually so that the original crop would not be all that they relied on.

He knew that Thor was not looking for this type of solution, he was, no doubt, think foreign aid as in sending them food boxes and carts of animals, but Loki was fairly certain once he explained his rational to Thor his solution would be acceptable. He thought it was a better long term solution anyways. And this form of gene splicing he’d used in his equation could be performed by the most basic magic wielder. Fates know, maybe Thor could even perform a few of the bushels. So the production wouldn’t put a noticeable strain on the Asgardian economy. Besides the point, the transportation method he’d proposed was efficient as well, five hundred flats a Bifrost trip and ten trips shouldn’t be a problem.

After studying a map of the population and running a mock simulation of his attack with the bifrost-- which had sent him straight to the bathhouse to empty his stomach several times-- he

located the ten most populated places on the surviving half of the planet and made note to deliver approximately ten miles from the densest point so they didn't start a massacre over the food.

Finding a diplomatic solution was much more difficult. Laufey had seven sons, excluding himself, from his wife Fárbauti and three daughters. According to the report five of the sons were dead leaving the third oldest, Helblindi, and the youngest, Byleistr, who still was barely to the age of an adolescence. The oldest daughter had been brutally murdered in the panic that ensued the sudden famine with her five brothers and the two who remained were Abeedha who was the oldest child of Laufey and Srusti the second youngest… his fingers had lingered on her name for some reason he could not explain.
He had decided Helblindi would be the rightful heir no doubt, but also listed several families that seemed to be fairly respected and upright for Thor to suggest as well, if the Council was squeamish about Laufey's line… running background checks from Asgard was hard. It was hard to find an amiable creature who was referred to as a "beast" or a "monster".

Finally he wrote Thor a complete write-up about what to suggest, what to open up for discussion, what to admit and what to let the Council squabble over so they still felt like they had power in the decision making process. He wrote "SUGGESTIONS" in all capital letters above the letter to Thor and bound all the plans up for his brother.

At six in the morning he settled back in his chair with a satisfied huff. That was the best work he'd had in a long time. A real problem with a solution he could chase down and trap. It helped that it helped ease his concious a bit. It shouldn't. It should do nothing to ease any suffering he deserved. He had been so blinded by his own pain and desire and fear that he had folded so far into Asgard's prejudice he'd been willing to decimate all of them. He hadn't thought of them as persons… as souls… he'd thought of them as animals. He'd thought himself one too.

He deserved to suffer like he had at the hand's of the Chitauri for eternity. He deserved to be tortured until he couldn't remember his name… until he didn't have one. For what he had done to the jotun people, to midgard, there was no redemption. He shouldn't feel proud that he was saving the other half of a race he'd destroyed the rest of. He shouldn't rest on weak excuses like being forced to attack Midgard by torture or mind manipulation. He was weak enough to give in. There was nothing to rest in that fact. And he didn't... feel proud, that is, for his solution to save the Jotuns. He did feel accomplished though… and perhaps a little bit more are peace. It was the first bit of contentment he'd felt since he'd tried to kill himself on the Bifrost.

He didn't dwell on it long. He didn't deserve it. Instead he sought out that name that had caught his eye for some reason. Srusti.
Srusti was a powerful Fairu --the jotun equivalent of a magic-wielder-- married to another Fairu when she was young. Jotun's did that. Married Fairu's to each other early on, before the age of maturation so their magic could still be bound to each other. But it wasn't her status of Fairu that caught his eye. It was her birth year.
1214 years ago.

As his fingers brushed the date he wondered with a rebellious quickening of his heart if he'd found his true birthdate. He'd known as soon as he'd discovered his heritage that the date he'd celebrated as his birthdate wasn't the real one. There was no way that Odin knew the exact day of his birth… or maybe he had and had purposefully lied about Loki's to help keep the secret unrevealed….

Srusti was a shapeshifter, like all Jotun Fairu's. Apparently Fairu's switched between their natural, Jotun form and their other shape. Those who shifted into cat's often time had cat like eyes and reflexes even when in Jotun skin, and those who shapeshifted into creatures of the sea were often times gilled and scaled. Srusti was only six feet tall, small for a giantess, two inches shorter than

Loki himself, who was a runt. But in the record he read from the Ambassador, she was not shunned… she was highly respected for her unusual amount of magic and control of it. Her other shape was Aesir.
When he'd read it, he stopped breathing.

Scrambling for that book of genealogies and Laufey's eleven children he traced down to her name. Srusti. Next to it was her name was the name of her twin brother. Shelah. He'd died in the last battle on Jotunheim. In the temple. Next to his sister. The first Fairu infant in fourteen centuries to die in the temple initiation with the runes of their people magic to protect him.

Temple. Abandoned. Left to die. Too small.

No.

Temple. Treasured. Left to be protected. Aesir shapeshifter.

Twin.

His breath came rushing back, feeding the flame of his flickering heart. His hands trembled. His eyes were blown wide. He swallowed hard. Then moved on.

He set the paper down on the desk and got up to take a bath before Thor came for the plans. What do you do when you find out you have a twin? A twin that had lost half of her people to your crimes against souls. A twin who watched her culture crumble around her slowly as you were raised by the enemy. What does one do when they discover something like a twin? An equal in magic and soul? A wombmate?

Nothing.

That's precisely what he intended to do. Absolutely nothing.

He was not Shelah, the mourned infant who died unexpectedly in ritual. The twin of their most powerful Fairu, heir to the temple. He would never be Shelah.

He was Loki. Despised son of Odin. Bringer of death and grief. Traitorous brother and shadow of the Crown Prince Thor. Killer. Murderer. Widower. Survivor. Alone. Despicable. He knew who he was.

He was not Shelah, who never got to grow up to be a man. He was Loki, the monster.

Chapter End Notes

Find me on Instagram @d_reagan_fly for my thoughts on writing, fanfiction, character development, character enneagrams/myers briggs, and more!

Chapter 11

Chapter 11
“Wait, all this time that I have spent away
Makes me think that I might be okay
The kiss of death will have to wait
My head, is holding on to all those things you said
You taught me to be strong and get through it, the mist of darkness
In my head.”
“Lost Cause” Imagine Dragons
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Loki had given Thor the plans and had run through them with him for about an hour that morning. Thor had been pleased and grateful, although he still stepped around Loki like he was a minefield. Maybe he was. He probably was.

Loki explained the numbers and reasoning behind the famine solution and then ran through the diplomatic options, weighing pros and cons for every option he’d discovered and then threw his opinion behind Helblindi because according to every report he’d read the man seemed to be level headed and even tempered. Which would be absolutely necessary for a rising leader of Jotunheim having to deal with Asgard as their primary source of aide.

Thor had been so pleased he’d wrapped his brother up in a hug, and Loki’d gone stiff as a board. There were so many ways to harm a person from this position. So many points of weakness exposed. Why did expression of gratitude or familiarity have to be so stupidly vulnerable? He had the fleeting memory of stabbing Thor with a small knife in a similar position, but the memory was faded and blue. It must be from New York then, while his mind was still being manipulated. Sometimes he still worried he wasn’t entirely himself anymore… but he didn’t really have a baseline to compare to. He wasn’t entirely sure who he was anymore; a disturbingly perfect position to be mind manipulated again.

Thor pulled away with an uncomfortable cough at Loki’s clear display of disinterest. That hadn’t exactly been what he’d intended to express to Thor by stiffening, he hadn’t really been thinking of Thor’s side of things at all, but he sure wasn’t going to try and correct the miscommunication of body language now. He was perfectly fine with Thor not giving him hugs. Even if he did miss them.

Thor thanked him and asked a few questions to make sure he’d got it right and then they’d stood there, silent and uncomfortable, before Thor excused himself and asked Loki to make sure and rest. And on that rare occasion, that he listened to his overbearing, overprotective, overpowered brother, he slept the remainder of the day.

He woke up in the evening and wondered how Thor’s meetings were going before calling Alannah and asking her for a bowl of soup. As she hurried off to oblige, Loki immersed himself back into the novel he’d been reading.

It was one of Sigyn’s. He’d been slowly working his way through her collection since he’d returned from Slvartleheim, it had been one of his projects and attempts to reorient himself. After Thanos had used the mind gem to tear his identity apart piece by piece slowly, and enhanced by physical torture as well, Loki had found he trusted very little about what he previously believed about the world. He didn’t know how much of it was him and how much was Thanos, so he’d been trying to rebuild a personality for himself over the past four years that he could claim as his own.

Reading fiction was something new he could claim. Sigyn always loved fiction and fantasy, but he'd always preferred hard cold facts. They were far less complicated. As long as you understood the process by which the fact or theory was found you could understand the text. But with Sigyn's fiction? The characters were often too life-like. Too unpredictable. They were people with souls, even one's woven from ink, and he hated that he could not control the outcome of their decisions. He was getting used to it though. He was creating a new side of himself and diving deeper into one he had only known relatively in his wife.

Alannah came back with his soup and he finished it quickly. He didn't know why he ate fast. It wasn't as though he were busy… he didn't have anywhere to go. But he always ate fast. He wondered if he ate fast growing up, or if it was a result of the prolonged starvation in the Chitauri holding cells? He could probably get it out of Thor, but that would arouse suspicion, and he really didn't want to go into all of that.

He was becoming quite certain that Odin had not informed Thor about the Chitauri prisons, and Thanos's mind molding techniques and it was probably for the best. There was nothing to be done about it now. All it would do was hurt Thor and then he'd have to talk about what had happened and he was still certain that the words would stick to his throat like they always did.

His mother had tried to pull it out of him when they first brought him back. She was the reason he was still alive, the reason Odin didn't execute him on the spot. Her mind walking had revealed some of what was tangled with his brain and she had petitioned on his behalf for imprisonment with treatment rather than execution. Odin agreed to the imprisonment and Frigga snuck in to do what healing she could from a distance. Mostly she just spoke with him and was patient when he suddenly turned into a different person.

He hadn't realized he'd been anyone other than himself until that time in the cell with her and it had to be one of the most frightening times of his life. He became aware of how very little control he had over his own mind.

When she'd died and Thor had come to ask his help, he'd wondered if he might snap and kill Thor or Jane if he lost control again, but he'd only come close twice. Once when he could feel the power of the Aether in Jane's veins. His vision had started to go blue and so he'd picked a fight with Thor, an easy-- non-breakable-- target to take his rage out on. The second time had been when he and Jane were surrounded by the horde of dark elves and his vision had gone completely blue that time. When he went blue… he liked to kill things… when he was "himself" he didn't… he was glad he hadn't killed Jane.

The sword through the chest had done wonders for his mental ailment, the amount of pain he'd been in had sent his system into a type of shock he now knew was unique to Jotuns. He went into a coma like state where his brain and vital functions were minimal and when he'd woken up in the healing rooms he'd lost all traces of blue. There hadn't been enough brain activity for the infinity gem to hold onto. He wasn't sure what the humans were doing with it right now, but he hoped he never had to come anywhere near it again.

He scratched at his chest uncomfortably at the memory and stood up abruptly when he felt his panic level rise.

"Do you want to get the next book in that series you've been reading, jente?" He asked Alannah suddenly.

The girl blinked at him in surprise but then grinned and nodded, scurrying off to get the one she'd finished the night before. Alannah had been endeavouring on the fiction phase with him, but her books had been coming from the main library. Books in hand, the two left as soon as she'd finished

her dinner and set out to find the next volume.
******

Loki knew something was off halfway to the Library. They'd taken a back route, less populated by the servants and members of the court, and Lok regretted it as soon as he heard the parade of footsteps and felt his hair inexplicably stand on end. He didn't know why he felt so uneasy, but he didn't need to. He was clinically paranoid according to the chief healer. Therefore he could freak out over whatever he wanted.

"Stay here," he pushed Alannah in a little alcove in the wall, "I need to… check on something." then he cast a cloak of invisibility over the girl and stepped back out into the hallway to see what it was that had spooked him.

The hallway was still empty, so he crept toward the the fork in it to see if the other wings were also empty. He reached to pull a dagger from his magic and gasped as white hot pain danced up his arm.

It nearly dropped him.

Staring at his throbbing hand, Loki felt panic begin to bubble up his esophagus. He tried to swallow it down and attempt to pull the dagger from his pocket in space again but stopped when his vision faded to the pain and he fell to one knee with a groan. His magic was being blocked. He couldn't access it.

He was trapped on the other side. No weapons. No illusions. No armor.

Only the Allfather had the power to take that from him.

The footsteps collected to the sound of heavy boots and armor clanking down the throat of the hallway and suddenly, as he leapt to his feet he realized the sound was coming from both the hallway in front of him, and behind him. Uneasily he began backing up but stopped before he cornered himself.

The owners of the footsteps rounded into the hallway by both ends. Loki swallowed as an entire troop of the Einherjar closed in on him solemnly. Of course it had to be the Einherjar, Loki thought with growing apprehension. And a whole squadron of them at that. The Einherjar were the best of Asgards soldiers, a select few that had been trained by the best in the realm, tasked with protecting the realm and quelling conflicts. The Princes had been trained by the same masters as these guards, the Warriors Three and Sif hadn't even made the cut.

He started mentally running through every curse in elvish he knew, and when he'd exhausted the list he started off in dwarvish.

They stopped in a semicircle around him with the wall to his back and he found himself cornered, without even having backed into one. The Einherjar made one.

He swallowed hard, arm still aching from the attempts at using magic and he forced two words through his tether with Alannah. It was using the last bit of magic the Allfather hadn't drained him of. He felt like his brain was disintegrating, but he needed to order her to,

'Stay hidden.'

"Gentlemen," Loki winced, "Can I help you?"

"Best to keep quiet, silver-tongue." A young guard named Illium said gruffly, "It will make this

part go faster.” Illium had trained in knife combat with Loki. They’d been married to their wives around the same time and had even found themselves getting drinks on rare occasions to confide in eachother. They had similar fighting techniques and were adventuring into the challenges of marriage at the time so it had seemed natural to confide in eachother for a few years.

“Next part?” Loki started groping at the wall behind him for a weapon, his fingers brushed a metal fruit basket and he almost groaned. Yes, he was going to defend himself from an entire squadron of the most highly trained soldiers in Asgard with an aluminum fruit basket. Splendid.

The captain of the squadron threw the first blow. Loki ducked and grabbed the fruit basket, swinging wildly and throwing Illium to the ground by a headshot. An Einherjar staff swung through the air and Loki barely had time to bring the fruit basket up to block it. The basket caved in half by the force of the blow and sent Loki staggering back into the wall.

Not good.

A flurry of kicks and evasive moves got him off the wall but there were thirty of them and one of him. His kicks and blows were simply outnumbered.

He ducked.

Besides the point they wore armor, unlike him, leaving very few openings for a good blow.

He snapped a good blow to a neck.

A blow to his right kidney hit it’s target. He fell to one knee, but fought his way back up. He couldn’t stay down too long. If they got him on the ground that’s where the worst damage would happen. He hit one across the temple and screamed as he felt as a few bones snap along the back of his hand.

Master! Alannah’s voice shrieked through his brain and panic overwhelmed the pain in his senses as he tried to scream back through their tether,

'Stay!'

Fates know what they would do to the defenseless little elfling. He didn’t know if his message got through, with so little magic left, and he found himself praying to whatever force would listen that his Alannah made it through this. They couldn’t find her. He couldn’t lose her too. A man landed a solid kick to his face as he was defending against a different one and he his the ground hard. The world spun at such a dizzying speed he couldn’t see.

His face was already swelling. A strong pair of hands grabbed his right arm and it was wrenched over a knee. His elbow joint hyper-extended. Then snapped. A screaming sound echoed down the belly of the hallway and he began to lose touch with reality.

Blows rained like hailstones. Boots blew in like a hurricane, breaking down the barricades protecting his vitals. Ribs shattered. Skull cracked. The ground was slippery and red. The light’s where salty. The smell was hot. The only thing he could feel was pain. On every side--

~~

“--this can all end if you just drop your mental wards. Let the Master in. Lord Thanos will relent if you only drop your--”

“No! NO! Please!”

Heat. Suffocating heat. His blue skin was melting, scalding, boiling. He trembled were he dangled above the magma and the Other dropped him and inch closer and burns slithered across his exposed skin.

“Please! Please!” If he could scream he would have, but his vocal chords were shredded by the heat. His throat had collapsed in on itself---

--Blue. Everything was blue. Glowing. Angry. He wanted them to suffer like he had. He would burn them all. Burn them to ash. Scatter them in the wind.--

Thor’s blood painted his hand from where he’d stabbed him. Guilt threatened to choke him, but he spat it out. Thor had thrown him off the Bifrost. He remembered Thor bodily throwing him into the void like trash… or had he let go? Madness was a bloody thing so bloo--

There was so much blood. Nari was painted in it. Sigyn’s body lay soaked in it. She drowned the room in her crimson flood. He was slipping… drowning in their scarlet. She hadn’t been able to save her child from the killer. He hadn't been there in time. She drew lines across her wrists. But she didn’t kill herself. She didn’t. Sigyn didn’t kill herself. She didn’t.

He let go. Felt his weight drop into the void but his mind dropped faster than his body.

~~

Someone was still screaming in the hallway.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12
“Brother let me be your fortress,
When the night winds are driving on.
Be the one to light the way,
Bring you home.
Brother let me be your shelter”

“Brother” NeedToBreathe

****

Thor thought that the meeting had gone better than expected. The Council had thrown a fit at first, but the logic behind Loki’s plans were hard to argue with. Eventually, Loki’s list of suggestions for the Council to argue about had worked like a gold mine and the Lords had unexpectedly found themselves arguing to find a solution instead of working against one. Odin had remained silent and impassive at the head of the table, but Thor felt satisfied that frustration was tightening around his lips and a slight glare glinted in his eye.

'Take that.' Thor had smirked. 'We win. Jotunheim gets aide.'

After the meetings for the day he’d gone out for a drink with Volstagg and it felt good. He hadn’t spent time with his friends in a long time. Fandral was characteristically out on a date, Sif was resting after just having returned from a mission, and Hogun was still in Vanaheim with his family, but Volstagg had been up for a drink and Thor always enjoyed his company. When one got Volstagg alone he seemed to glow in a different light. When he was in the group he was easy going and went with the flow, but one on one, Vlostagg’s greater age showed and Thor found he learned a lot from his friend.

Thor had confided in him about Jane in their difficult first year of marriage, and had expressed his terror when she came close to delivering Frigga. Volstagg was a married man and father of six himself and had practically coached Thor through the entire process. He hadn’t realized how much he needed his older friend until that time.

Their conversation after the meeting had been mostly catching up, and Thor had landed on the topic of Loki after a while. He couldn’t talk about Loki to any of his other friends. They all shut him down with their very vocal hatred of his traitorous sibling. But Volstagg would listen to Thor before making a judgment.

He expressed his hopefulness that he was making progress with Loki and at Volstagg’s dubious look he’d explained the situation with Jotunheim and how Loki had developed the brilliant plan to send them aide. Volstagg had sat through it patiently and nodded along, taking sips of his beer in between and listening intently.

“Yeah…” He relented, “It does sound like he might be coming around… don’t get your hopes up though Thor, you know he’s done this before… I mean, I hope he comes around too, just… I don’t want you getting your heart broken over this again.”

Thor sighed, “I think I’m destined to be heartbroken over Loki for as long as we’re alive.”

Volstagg had chuckled, “You might be right there, friend.”

Thor chuckled along with him and finished his ale, “I should probably be getting back…”

“I’ll walk with you.” Volstagg had offered and Thor was once again grateful. Volstagg was strangely considerate when it came to Thor being so absurdly lonely. He didn’t seem to find it odd at all.

They had taken a long route back through the less occupied hallways to try and extend their discussions as long as possible.

“--it’s not that I don’t want my daughter’s courting,” Volstagg was trying to explain, “It’s just I’d rather they wait a few years! They’re barely to the age of maturation and-- no, stop laughing at me! I’m not an overbearing father!”

“Oh, no!” Thor had chuckled, “Not at all!”

“Alright, Prince know-it-all,” Volstagg had shoved him as they had rounded the corner, “You just wait until your little Frigga is old enough to…” Volstagg’s voice trailed off and they both froze.

Thor’s heart had stuttered and then stopped in his chest. He heard Volstagg curse next to him and they both just stood there for what seemed like an eternity, just staring.

This wasn’t real. This was a strange dream of some kind. There wasn’t actually a mutilated body lying in the hallway. That scarlet pool wasn’t actually blood. That figure wasn’t vaguely familiar. That mop of black hair painted in red wasn’t Loki’s. This wasn’t real.

He should check for a pulse.

But he couldn’t. His heart was still dead in his chest, his breath void from his lungs, as Volstagg lurched forward and knelt down next the the body. No not body. It wasn’t a body. Wasn’t a person. Wasn’t his brother. It couldn’t be. This wasn’t real.
Volstagg was gently turning the body over, muttering a stream of curses as he surveyed the damage and Thor wanted to shout,
'Stop! Don’t turn him over! I don’t want to see… I can’t….' but nothing came from his mouth.

The body’s head lolled to the side and Thor couldn’t even recognize half of his face. It was swollen and discolored in violent shades of black and purple. Volstagg placed a hand on the throat and muttered,

“He’s alive.” He glanced up at Thor and growled, “Snap out of it, Thor. Get over here and help me.”

Alive. Alive. Alive. He was alive. But that wasn’t possible. There was so much color on the tiled floor, and painted on his brother’s skin.

“Thor!” Volstagg roared and the Crown Prince jerked out of his shell of shock and rushed to his brother’s side.

Loki’s body was a wreck. Multi-colored bruised flowered across his porcelain white skin, blood was pumping from a wounded right arm where white bone protruded from the flesh and the lower half of the limb was bent at a nauseating angle. His left leg was also twisted wrong at the ankle and blood matted his hair to the left side of his skull.

“Loki,” Volstagg was slapping the side of his face gently and Thor felt like screaming, Stop! Don’t hit him! Please don’t hit him! “Loki, can you hear me? Come on, wake up…”

Volstagg fumbled at his belt for his flask of mead and unscrewed the cap to splash it in the beaten man's face.

Loki sputtered to life and flailed against Volstagg's grip violently. He was screaming something unintelligible and thrashing against the older man's hold as Volstagg tried helplessly to calm the panicking younger man.

Thor immediately reached out and pulled Loki against him, shuddering as Loki's bloodied head made a sickening smacking noise against his armor.

Loki struggled against him too for a moment, an animal-like whining noise whimpering though his throat, but Thor murmed,

"It's me, Loki. Shhh, It's me. It's Thor. I'm here, quiet down, you're hurting yourself, Loki it's alright, it's me…" he choked on a sob as Loki relaxed against him in exhaustion, the one eye, not swollen shut, drooping in defeat. He wasn't even sure if Loki was relaxing because he trusted Thor, or if he was just giving up.

Volstagg was reaching forward to gently feel the side of Loki's head and the dark haired prince moaned and passed out again against Thor's chest.

"His skull is fractured at the very least." Volstagg looked like he might be about to lose his dinner.

Thor was shaking. He was useless. There was nothing to fight here. There was nothing to protect his brother from in the moment; he was here in the aftermath of it all. The only thing left was the broken figure in his arms. "We need to get Eir." His friend was deciding as he tore off a piece of his cloak to try and wrap around the snapped arm to stop the bleeding.

"Should we move him?" Thor mumbled numbly.

Volstagg was as white as a sheet as he shook his head and muttered, "I have no idea…"

"M-m-my P-princ-c-ce?" A voice shivered behind him and he looked up to see Alannah inch forward from behind a doorway. Tears made her face glisten in the light of the torches and Thor could see her knees threatening to give way underneath her.

"Oh fates!" Volstagg gasped, rising to his feet and reaching for the girl who was chewing her lip bloody, "Did you see everything, little one?!" he surprised the servant girl by wrapping her up in the safety of a bear hug. She stiffened at first but then collapsed against the fatherly figure and started sobbing. "What is this realm coming to?" Thor heard

Volstagg murmur as he comforted the girl.

Thor looked down at the broken body in his arms and wondered the same thing. He had just seen Loki well and healthy this morning. How had this happened? Who would do this? Why… why was Loki not wearing armor? It was only a spell away… he could change into armor almost instantaneously… unless… Thor felt the shock melt into disbelieving fury… Odin wouldn't…

But he did. There was no other reason for this. He remembered that glint in Odin's eye differently now.

Thor couldn't believe he'd been out celebrating, having a drink with a friend while Odin had organized to have Loki beaten within an inch of his life for helping Thor with his plan. Thor was going to be sick after this. Horrifically sick.

“Alannah,” His voice sounded dead even to himself, “Will you run for the Chief healer, please. Tell her to come to my chambers immediately. And hurry.”

The elfing sniffled and smeared the tears off her face with a determined nod before taking off down the hallway and Volstagg came back to Thor’s side.

“We’re taking him back to your chambers?” He asked.

Thor nodded, “He will be safest there. He can’t go back to his own yet. Will you pull that tapestry off the wall? We can use it to carry him.”

Volstagg stared down at his friend, cradling the second prince, before murmuring quietly, “You know who's responsible, don’t you?”

“Just get the tapestry, Volstagg.” Thor snapped.

Volstagg hesitated for a second longer but then obliged, pulling the large tapestry from the wall forcefully. He folded it into fourths so it was approximately the size of a stretcher and then helped lay Loki atop it.

“Careful with his head,” Volstagg warned, “Watch the arm there.”

With Volstagg at the feet and Thor at the head, they pulled the tapestry taut before lifting the broken prince, careful not to let it hammock and possibly cause more damage.

Then his friend helped him carry his brother’s body to safety. To shelter. Home.

Thor wished he could swear no one would ever touch his brother again. But he knew he couldn’t. He’d made such foolish promises before.

And look at how well he’d protected him thus far.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13
“Can you hear the wind that's howling
Through the concrete trees
Got you praying on your knees
In the face of danger we're all brave
'Til the gun goes bang, bang, bang
It's a cruel, cruel world”

“Cruel World” Tommee Profitt

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Jane couldn’t wait to hear how Thor’s day had gone and hear about whatever plan Loki had developed for him. From what Thor had summarized for her, she’d decided that the Council members where a bunch of racist, old, bigots and she decidedly hated them. She hoped Loki’s plan destroyed their attempts of genocide. Like what kind of government did that? Thor had sighed and explained that it was “complicated”, but hadn’t gone into much more detail than that. Her opinion was made up though. Asgard was racist against humans and blue people.

That morning, before leaving, Thor had muttered Loki had probably kept himself up all night working on the plan and Jane had decided it probably best to leave her brother-in-law alone for the day in hopes that he would sleep the day away. He showed several signs of severe sleep deprivation already and she figured pulling an all-nighter developing a controversial political plan probably hadn’t helped. It sounded fun, challenging and invigorating, but exhausting; and honestly she wasn’t entirely sure what kept Loki running. Caffeine?

He did react to it. He certainly didn’t end up bouncing off the walls or chattering away, but his eyes would brighten and, although he was still Loki -- aloof, and somehow always separated from the conversation with whatever else went on inside that brilliant, dark, probably traumatized brain-- he seemed to humm with a little bit more excitement when caffeinated. It confused her. He had verified that Aesir weren't susceptible to the effects of caffeine, but Loki obviously was.

Thor had mentioned Loki was adopted… and she started wondering if adopted might mean… like adopted from another planet sort of adoption. Could you do that? Did they have cross-solar system adoption agencies? She’d have to ask Thor.

Gertrude had generously taken Frigga for the evening and Jane was enjoying a much needed study evening, all to herself, when the door to their sitting room was kicked open. Jane yelped and leapt to her feet.

Aenon called out to her as he started rushing towards the sitting room, but she didn’t respond. She was frozen in time and space as she watched Thor shuffled into the room backwards, followed by Volstagg, an unconscious Loki being carried between them.

At least she thought it was Loki at first glance… but a second glance had her doubting herself. She couldn’t recognize his face. His face wasn’t his face. It was swollen and black and blue and purple and bloody and it wasn’t shaped right.

“What is it my lady?” Aenon finally reached the sitting room and gasped. “Oh, fates above.” He murmured next to her before rushing to Thor’s side, “How can I assist, my Prince?”

“Strip the covers in the guest bedroom, leave only the sheet.” Thor grunted, obviously focussed very carefully on Loki’s head. It looked bashed in.

Brain damage. Was Jane’s immediate thought and panic bubbled up within her. Of course she was terrified for Loki’s life… was he still alive? But she’d been terrified of brain damage since she was a child and her mother died of brain cancer. It was awful. It was helpless.

It didn’t matter how intelligent one was, when the brain was damaged in anyway it took its toll. It had killed her mom when Jane was nine; but not before taking her memory, her speech and her strength. Her mother had been a brilliant professor who toured on a world circuit. Jane had the awful memory of trying to feed her soup and having chunks of it fall out of her mom’s gaping mouth. It didn’t even seem like mom was mom anymore.

Brain damage was probably Jane’s worst fear.

And a bashed in skull? Yeah that had brain damage written all over it.

“Jane, will you get a basin of warm water?” Thor’s voice was off. It was dead. Cold. Distant. “Bring rags too.” he added,

“Add a few teaspoons of salt too,” Volstagg added as they shuffled past her. She stared straight at that face she’d seen yesterday and couldn’t recognize today. “It will help ward off infection.” She saw the white of a bone sticking out of Loki’s right bicep and turned around to barf into the trash can full of wadded up papers and broken quill pens.

She stayed bent over the trash can panting for a long time before wobbling into the bathhouse on trembling knees in a fresh sweat. She moaned. She’d never seen anything… anything like this. Had he fallen from the tallest balcony in the palace? Been trampled by horses? Been hit by one of those golden winged speeders? Surely, she thought as she filled a basin with warm water and dropped the salt in with shaking hands, people couldn’t do that much damage to one another…

But they did. Didn’t they? What about those mob lynchings in the south? Or the Holocaust camps in WWII? What about how people used to whip each other to death? Or crucify each other? People would do terrible things to each other. She shoved a bundle of washrags under her arm and then grunted as she heaved the basin up and waddled into the other room, still dizzy and nauseous from being sick. Why was it so hot in here?

She finally made it to the guest bedroom where Aenon was trying to gently pull Loki by his good arm onto the bare bed and Thor and Volstagg were growling warnings like,

“Watch his head!”

“No, don’t pull too hard we don’t know if his collar bone is--”

“Wait! Don’t roll him! There could be internal injuries!”

“Watch the arm there, don’t pull the cloth loose..”

Jane set the water basin on the dresser and whispered,

“Thor…?”

He didn’t seem to hear her and was kneeling on the bed next to his brother, gently trying to stroke blood matted hair back from his face.

“Thor?” Jane tried again, but gagged and turned away when she saw how her husband’s palms were caked in red.

There was a knock at the door and Jane stumbled through the sitting room to get it.

Alannah lept into her arms, and Jane -- still in shock-- just pulled her in closer and shook with the girl.

Eir, the Chief Healer had a kit in her hand, a scowl on her dark face, and her thick grey streaked black hair pulled back viciously as usual. With her broad shoulders and a muscular frame, not many were surprised when her daughter had been selected to train as a Valkyrie when she grew into a similar build. A half-patched up Lady Sif stood behind her.

Sif had a cut slicing from her left ear to the middle of her cheek, drawing and angry red incision beneath her cheek bone. It looked to be halfway through the healing process. Eir was no doubt working on her before Alannah ran to get her. Sif was as glaring and grim as usual and clutched at her sword harshly. Thor said it took Sif a while to wind down from missions.

“Well?” Eir stomped impatiently, “I heard he was dying again. Where is he?”

Jane tried to speak but found her throat was full of cotton and she choked on her esophagus before just pointing at the open doorway to the guest room and Eir pushed past her to march into the room, three women trailing behind her, Jane and Alannah still clinging to each other.
Eir pushed Volstagg out of the way bodily and slapped a hand on the patient’s throat to feel his pulse.

“Eh,” Eir muttered, “he’s survived worse.” She set her medical bag down decisively on the bed stand and began rolling up her sleeves up her soft chocolate colored forearms.

“Shirt and shoes off.” She demanded, “No, you half-wits! Cut them off don’t pull them off!” She shoved a small knife in Aenon and Thor’s hands, “And cut the trousers at mid-thigh. Someone pull that desk over here.”

Volstagg and Sif started forward and each took a side of the piece of furniture and began moving it over to where Eir was setting up her station. Jane watched Sif’s face whiten when she first saw Loki up close but her jaw flexed and she swallowed any other reaction well. Jane was impressed, she’d lost it. Literally lost it in the trash can. Sif had probably seen things like this before though.

Was this sort of thing normal here? Oh, you know, every four years the Council of grumpy old farts engage in a little game of beating the mind behind the opposition to a bloody pulp? Jane had the sudden, gut twisting urge to go home. Home, home. On earth. Have an ice-cream night with Darcy and cry about stupid things like a Nicholas Sparks movie and pretend to be a normal person. Not a person with three Phds and a genius level IQ who was trying to convince the scientific community of the existence of aliens, or the crown princess of an alien realm that wasn’t even in the same solar system where war was a game and dirty politics made people’s faces unrecognizable.

“When did you find him?” Eir snapped, running her hands over Loki’s now exposed skin with gold lit magic sparking from her palms to do a body check.

“Fifteen minutes ago.” Thor responded in that cold, dead tone that sent a shiver down Jane’s spine… it just wasn’t right.

“Did he wake ever up?” Eir, frowned as she came to the arm with the protruding bone.

“He woke up once, when I splashed him,” Volstagg answered this time with a voice that was actually trembling a bit. Sif placed a hand on her friends arm comfortingly.

Okay, so maybe this wasn’t normal. Jane didn’t know if that was comforting or not.

“Was he coherent?” Eir muttered.

“Not really.” Volstagg winced. “He panicked.”

“Mmmhhhmmm,” Eir pursed her lips in concentration and warned the occupants of the room, “That’s going to happen a lot tonight, probably.” She brought her hands up to either side of Loki’s head and closed her eyes but continued explaining, “He’ll probably be very disoriented for awhile.”

“What happened?” Sif was the first one to voice what everyone in the room was thinking.

“What happened?” Eir rolled her eyes and then gestured to Thor to hold Loki’s frame still as she used her magic to set Loki’s arm with an awful snapping noise that made even Sif flinch. “I’ll tell you what happened.” the ancient healer growled. “My favorite patient-- who also happens to be the worst patient-- decided it would be a good idea to get yet another one of the most powerful beings in the universe angry with him. As per usual. And now he’s dying and it’s not at all his fault.” Eir shook her head and muttered,

“Mischief? God of bad luck more like it. Am I right?” She gave Thor a pointed look and when Thor wouldn’t meet her gaze and failed to swallow his tears, she sighed with an almost tender cupping of her patient’s face as she began surveying the damage to his brain.

Jane quietly excused herself and Alannah, and took the shaking girl back into the sitting room. Volstagg followed and patted the two on the shoulders before guiding them into chairs by the hearth and saying in a gentle tone,

“How about some tea? Anyone want tea? It’ll help settle the nerves.”

“I don’t understand…” Alannah started to cry again and Jane pulled the elf-girl’s head onto her shoulder to comfort her. “He didn’t do anything wrong! He was trying to help them… why would they hurt him?”

“I don’t know,” Jane murmured as Volstagg shook his head and wandered off to make tea. “I don’t know.”

Jane tried not to think too hard about the fact that she’d only made friends with her brother-in-law three days ago and she might never get another chance. They might lose him this time. And even if they didn’t… he might not ever be the same. There was no telling.

She hoped she didn’t lose her husband tonight too. She knew she was close…. But she hoped this didn’t drag him so far away she couldn’t reach him anymore. He’d been dancing so close to the edge… bent so far he was destined to break. She was afraid to lose him.

Feeling helpless and afraid, she rocked Alannah to sleep and drank both cups of tea.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 14
“How can I say this without breaking
How can I say this without taking over
How can I put it down into words
When it's almost too much for my soul alone,
I loved and I loved and I lost you”
“Hurts Like Hell” Fluerie

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Loki woke up warm. His eyelids were heavy and the sunlight filtering through the curtains gently stroked them shut again quietly. He felt weak. And tired. But there was a weight in his chest that was comfortable and he gave a contented sigh. He could stay here forever.

“What was that?” A full, warm voice murmured sleepily next to him. “Was that an awake sigh, or a dream sigh?”
“Mmmmm.” he murmured. His brain wasn't awake enough to form sentences.

She chuckled and nuzzled her unbelievable soft face between his shoulder blades. A pair of full lips pressed a kiss to his spine. He smiled and rolled over to wrap his arms around her so he could hold onto her. He didn’t ever want to let go.

She fit to him perfectly, like a puzzle piece. He was tall and thin, she was short and curvy. He was dark and she was light. She was warm and he was cold. He was living and she was…

“Is it time yet?” He murmured into her hair that smelled like honey.

Sigyn sighed against his chest and then pushed herself up to look down at him.

“Why are you always trying to leave before it’s your time?” She ran a gentle hand, calloused by her bow and pencils, down his cheek and he felt heat burn behind his eyes. Salt water blurred her face.

“I’m not the one who left first.” He whispered, and his voice cracked in two.

Sigyn frowned and set her arm down on the other side of him so he was trapped beneath her. He could stay here forever.

“Why would you say that?” She murmured, her hip length hair falling around them like a curtain of golden sunlight. “I didn’t want to leave you.”

Loki tilted his head to the side and his gaze traced the thick scars that tattooed her wrists. His tears soaked the pillow as he whispered,

“Yes... you did…” he shut his eyes against it, like he could block the world out if only he couldn’t see it. Why did the pain have to follow him here? Couldn’t he just have this moment with her? He was only trapped between worlds so often. “I understand…” he finally sighed, forcing his heavy

lidded eyes open again. “I- I… I understand that… that you lost Nari--”

“I should have been there.” Sigyn’s eyes blazed in an immortal sapphire fury and she clenched her fists.

“I know.” Loki sighed. “I should have been there too… for both of you… I… I failed you both… but...no… I understand why you left; you lost Nari… and she was our everything.” he shuddered.

“Loki.” Sigyn’s hand cupped his jaw and turned his face to look at her. “Nari was part of my everything… but so where you. You know I would never leave you.”

But she did.

“Why can’t I stay with you?” he changed the subject, feeling his soul crumbling within the cavity of his chest. “Why can’t I come home?”

Sigyn sighed and slid down to rest her head on his chest and listen to his heart beat. He wondered it he touched her throat, or lay his head on her breast, or touched the scars on her wrists if she would have one as well. He couldn’t bear the thought of not finding one, so he didn’t try any of them. Instead he caged her against him and pressed his lips the top of her gold crowned head. He could stay here forever.

“You will.” she promised. “You will come home. Just not yet. It’s not your time. You still have a role to play in all of this.”

“What if I don’t want it?” He choked. “What if I only want you.”

“Then stay.” she tightened her own grip around him. “Stay there and find him.”

“Find who?” he didn’t want to find anyone but her.

“The man who killed my baby,” he felt her warm tears slip onto his bare chest and he held her as tightly as he dared without crushing her.

They had already found the assassin. The man who had come to kill the outcome of the treaty between their realms. An Asgardian fanatic who hated elves and the treaty that their marriage made between the peoples. Loki had hunted him down and killed him, himself. It still tore him apart in a suffocating numbness; his precious little girl, his treasure, was murdered for a political opinion.

“And the man who killed me.” She was shaking.

“What do you mean?” he frowned as his heart paused in his chest.

“I would never leave you of my own free will, Loki.” he could feel her glaring. “Listen to what he said.”

“What he said?” Loki asked. “I don’t understand… who? What who said?”

“I love you. You are my everything.” she leaned up kissed him on the forehead.

Suddenly the sunlight felt away into torchlight and the bed hardened into unforgiving stone of the hallway, and their chambers crumbled away leaving him curled up in the hallway. Sigyn was gone. He choked in the pool of his own blood on the tiled floor and shuddered as he remembered the blood Sigyn had drowned in, her own and the blood of their child. He could feel his bones

fracturing and splintering but none of them could break quite like a heart did.

“Alright! Alright!” A distant voice was shouting. “Stop! We weren’t given any orders to kill him! Back off now!”

Footsteps receded. Darkness approached. Pain continued.

A hand touched his shoulder and he heard something whine. Oh, that was him.

“Loki?” the voice was shaking. “Fates, how long was I out for?” Ilium? Hadn’t he hit him over the head with a fruit basket? “Can you hear me? Listen, can you hear me? Tell me if you can hear me.”

Loki pushed a moan from his throat, raw from screaming.

“Listen. It was an order, alright? Look, it wasn’t personal… It wasn’t… it wasn’t supposed to go this far…” Illium sighed and said, “I don’t know if you’ll remember this when you wake up… but you should know… I can’t repeat this again… but…” There was a hesitation and Loki noticed that silence was loud like a hive of bees.

“Odin killed them.” Three words. Whispered. Conspired. Forgotten. “I’m… I’m really sorry.”

Footsteps receded.

Odin killed them. Who? Blackness was lapping at the shore of his mind. The sirens were luring him in...they sounded like Sigyn. He didn’t mind. He wanted to go. He’d follow them willingly. Can I go home?

“Not yet… it’s not your time yet…”

“Stay there and find him.”

“The man who killed my baby…

“And the man who killed me.”

Who? What? How?

Three words.

Odin.

Killed.

Them.

~~

Loki woke up cold.

Chapter End Notes

Please comment! :)

-D.

P.S. Bravo, ImperialDragon! You totally called it! ;) Good eye for foreshadowing, I haven't had many people catch on that quickly! :)

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Nanda, this chapter is dedicated to you! Thanks for your chapter by chapter comments! I needed them! :)
-D.

Chapter 15

“ Blessed is the servant who loves his brother
as much when he is sick and useless
as when he is well and an be of service to him.
And blessed is he who loves his brother
as well when he is afar off as when he is by his side,
and who would say nothing behind his back
he might not, in love, say before his face.”

– St. Francis of Assisi
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Thor was trying to do everything Eir told him, but there seemed to be a delay between hearing what she said and completing the order. She was even more snappish than normal, which was saying a lot, and she had a tightening around her eyes showing how worried she really was.

Thor was more than worried. He was sick. After cutting Loki’s clothes off him he’d thought he very well might lose it right then and there. Aenon and he had both froze and shared a look before shakily continuing. Eir was frowning and muttering to herself, organizing her healing instruments as though none of what was being revealed surprised her and Thor was grateful that Alannah and Jane were leaving. He didn't want them to see this. He didn’t want to see this.

“What is that!” Sif started swearing behind Thor as he brought a shaking hand up to lay on Loki’s scarred chest. It wasn’t just the thick and gnarled scar from Slvatleheim that split his ribcage in half, though, Loki’s entire body was littered in scars. There wasn’t more than an inch of unscarred flesh in sight. There were deep gashes, shallow skinnings, and large, boiled sections of flesh that never healed over from third degree burns. Even worse, seared into the left side of his chest, directly above the heart, was a brand. Someone had branded him. Like property.

Volstagg left to follow Jane and Alannah.

Thor hadn’t realized he wasn’t breathing until Eir told him so.

“Breathe.” She snapped, smacking his shoulder.

Sif pushed Aenon aside and reached out like she was going to touch the brand like Thor was, but didn’t, letting her hand hover a few inches above the broken, beaten and scarred ribcage. Her face was bone white and her lips looked like they were painted in chalk.

“Sif?” Thor wasn’t surprised that all he could master was a croak.

“This… this… no it’s not possible…” She withdrew her hand that Thor noticed was shaking as much as his were. Sif never shook.

“Sif, what is it?” Thor caught her hand as she pulled back. “Do you recognize it?”

Sif looked lost. She opened her mouth and closed it, her brain working through some impossible revelation behind the hazel green irises of War herself.

“I--” She clenched her jaw and regripped her sword with her free hand. “I know that brand…” She glanced up at Thor as though she was regretting even speaking of it at all.

“What is it?” Thor’s grip tightened on her wrist and she glared at him for how hard he squeezed before twisting free.

“It’s… it’s not possible… but it’s the brand of a Chitauri slave… I encountered many on this last mission Odin sent me on. He was having me take out chitauri scouting hordes… their slaves were all marked like this...even the women and children.”

“Hhmmphh,” Eir rolled her eyes and began grinding a healing stone down so it could be drunk. “I wonder where Odin got the information on where to find them.” she remarked sarcastically. “Maybe from a former Chitauri slave?” She raised her eyebrows suggestively and gestured to Loki.

Thor felt the blood roaring behind his eyes and ears as he growled, “You knew of this?”

“Knew that your brother was tortured and mind-enslaved by the Chitauri? I’m surprised you didn’t.” She gave him a look of disapproval. “Did none of his actions on Earth or Asgard seem strange to you? Have you not noticed any of the symptoms?”

“What do you mean?” His lips were numb as the question tumbled from his lips. “Does Odin know of this?”

“Oh, the Allfather knows all about it.” Eir slammed her fist down on the desk and it made Sif, still jumpy from her last mission, start and bring her blade up defensively.

“The All-failing-father’s excuse for his treatment of Loki, even knowing what he had endured, was that he should have resisted longer. Longer? He held off for three years! You know what your all-failing-father doesn’t understand? Everybody breaks. Everyone! And I’d be willing to bet Odin wouldn’t have lasted half the time that Loki had. Here, lay these stones around his broken ankle like so.”

Sif raised her eyebrows at Eir’s blatant accusation at the Allfather and was met with a,

“Oh, don’t look at me like that! I will speak my mind whenever I please! If the Allfather wants to try and silence me like he has his second son, let him try.” dared the mother of a well-remembered Valkyrie.

Thor’s body was vibrating, actually vibrating, with some unnamable emotion. He felt strangely aware of everything, the color of the white sheets, their crimson stains, and the bruises painting his brother’s body were so crystal clear he looked away before they blinded him. The smell of blood and healing powder were so potent he gagged. The feeling of Loki’s heart beat against his hand was so loud he could hear it even over his roaring thoughts.

Loki’s strange behavior on Midgard… the madness in his eyes… the maniacal grin of delight as he killed mortals… was not Loki. It was… something other… How could he not have known? Why had Loki not told him all these years later? He understood that Loki probably couldn't while being

mind-manipulated, but--

He shouldn't have had to explain it, echoed bitterly through his head, you're his brother, aren't you? You should have been able to tell.

But Odin had said…? Odin. Thor sneered. As soon as he knew Loki would be alright, he was going to get answers out of that tyrant if he had to beat them out of him. Hate for his father finally settled onto Thor's shoulders with an unbearable weight. No son should feel this for his father… but no father should be willing to do these things to a son.

Tears blurred Thor's view of his brother.

"Alright," Eir lifted a small bowl of healing stone grit in a potion and ordered Thor and Sif, "Lift him up a bit so he doesn't choke on himself.

Sif sheathed her sword on her back and sat down opposite of Thor so they could obediently lift Loki's head and shoulders, gently supporting his neck and head when they received a warning growl from the ancient healer.

"This might wake him up." Eir warned, "And he'll probably panic." She held Loki's mouth open and poured the potion down his throat for the internal injuries. After a few seconds Loki frowned and twitched, but remained unconscious.

Sif and Thor looked at each other in worry and then glanced back up at Eir who had planted her fists on her broad hips and noted,

"Hmmm, I really thought he'd have a more violent--"

Loki snapped awake with a gasp and Thor felt his heart rate soar."--reaction." Eir smirked triumphantly for being right as Thor and Sif tried calm the panicking prince down. He struggled against them weakly, his broken and recasted right arm prevented him from any real strength. Wild panic flooded his green eyes and he let out a disoriented shriek when Thor and Sif tried to hold him down, twisting and writhing under their grip like… like they were going to hurt him. Thor realized. Loki was snapping back into another reality… his brother had been tortured into submission. Of course he would panic violently. Thor felt dizzy with the realization.

"Loki!" He called, "Loki! Stop! Stop! It's us! It's Sif and Thor! It's me, brother, you're alright, Loki! Stop, you're going to hurt yourself!"

"Thor, you hold him."Eir ordered, and the thunder god obliged, pulling a still struggling Loki into a tight embrace like he had in the hallway. Loki whimpered and began to shake as soon as his panic ridden brain realized he couldn't pull free from the Thunderer's grip.

"It's alright."Thor promised and he hoped it was true. "It's me, it's Thor. I'm here."

"Loki, look at me." Eir gripped the patient's chin and turned his bruised face to look at her. "Breathe. It's Eir. Can you hear me? Don't you dare disobey Eir, you're not that stupid, right? I told you to breathe, so inhale--" Thor watched in amazement as Loki's gaze focussed a little better on Eir and obediently took a deep breath in. "Now exhale." again she was obeyed. "See? Feeling better already, aren't we? Oxygen does wonders, doesn't it?"

Loki was still pale as a ghost, and shaking like a leaf in Thor's arms, but he didn't struggle any more.

"No, no, no," Loki was muttering like it was the only word he knew. "No, no, no--"

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous.” Eir scolded, “Loki look at me.” She grabbed his chin again. “Breathe…. That’s right. You’re on Asgard now. You’re alright. You’re on Asgard.” Loki remained placid in Thor’s arms and his eyes glazed over. “Uhh!” Eir grunted, “Guess that head injury ought to be dealt with, eh? I was hoping to get to your lungs first, but I suppose the potion will give me a couple minutes. You know we can’t just go around handing out new brains and lungs. These really aren’t things you should be going through so quickly. They’re vitals for fates’ sake! Thor you’re going to need to hold him the whole time, so get comfortable. Alright, let’s see what you’ve done to your poor abused skull, eh?”

Loki’s forehead looked like white frost between the warm colored hands placed on either side of his head at the temples. He shivered against Thor like he was cold and stared up at the ceiling vacantly. Eir frowned as she worked and the expression nearly sent Thor into hysterics. Loki twitched and cried quietly, thin lips parted at a stream of absent murmurs fell from them to drop around his brother’s neck like milestones.

“She didn’t kill herself,” Loki whispered with dead, glassy eyes. “She didn’t kill herself. Sigyn wouldn’t. She didn’t. She wouldn’t. She didn’t kill herself…” He denied, over and over and over again.

“Shhh,” Thor finally broke down, and Eir didn’t comment this time, thankfully, she was too focussed on her golden tendrils of magic threading through Loki’s brain trying to find the tear so she could weave his mind back together. Thor tried to repress his sobs as best he could while holding his broken brother who was still in denial five-hundred years after he’d lost her.

“She didn’t kill herself.” Loki twitched under the healer's touch and cried out louder, “She didn’t! She wouldn’t! She didn’t kill herself! Please… please, no-- not my Nari… please no!”

“Shhh,” Thor kept hushing his brother in between his own sobs. There was nothing to say. No words of comfort he could offer. His little child had been slaughtered by a madman and his wife, expecting their second child, had killed herself in her grief.

“She didn’t kill herself. She didn’t. She wouldn’t--”

But she had.

She’d left Loki here alone.

Loki had never expressed any anger with Sigyn for this abandonment, but Thor had.

He couldn’t imagine what it would be like to lose Jane and Frigga like that-- he shuddered even to think of it.

“Shhhh,” was all he could say and he pressed a teary kiss to his brother’s color bruised forehead.

“Careful!” Eir snapped.

Thor bit his lip and shudder sobbed. He glanced up at Sif who was wearing a wooden expression and a silver sheen of saline filming her fierce eyes. She had been one of Sigyn’s closest friends, and Thor was not surprised in the slightest, when the next time Loki cried,

“She didn’t kill herself! She wouldn’t...Sigyn...please…”

Sif stood promptly and left the room, spine straight as her sword, and eyes as dark as her cloak.

The next few hours were spent cradling Loki -- who fell in and out of consciousness frequently --

while Eir alternated between reweaving the damage to the brain and healing his broken ribcage and punctured lungs. Eir complained a lot in her gruff way that showed she cared, Thor cried a lot more than he had in years, and Loki… Loki hung on. That's all Thor could really ask for.

By midnight Loki was stable and Eir helped Thor dress him in a spare pair of Thor's clothing. Then they nested him in a pile of pillows and blankets to keep him from hurting himself in his sleep and Eir cast a gold healing tegere over the bed. A leather armchair had been dragged in for shifts to stay up with Loki and a diverse selection of books offered to Eir who took first shift. She expected him to recover, but didn't want to leave him in the first night.

Sif had waited until he came out to bid her goodbye and leave. Volstagg had had to return to his family she explained for him. He'd nodded his head in thanks mutley and had pulled Sif into a hug when she tried to awkwardly clap him on the back. When he let her go she wore that wooden expression again and bid them all goodnight again before fleeing the scene to go grieve in the safety of isolation. Sif grieved like Loki did. Solitary and refined.

Thor had picked Alannah up and carried her into Gertrude's room where Jane and the older woman had tucked the elfling into the trundle bed that pulled out from under Gertrude's. Frigga had been nursed again, Aenon and Gertrude thanked for their help and dismissed, and they checked on Eir who was reading a dwarvish satire and snorting to herself in sarcastic mirth.

"How are you doing?" Jane whispered to him as they lay in bed, foreheads pressed against each other.

"He'll survive." Was all Thor said, but Jane really knew it meant they all would.

They would get through this. They would survive. How was he? He'd survive.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

I'm back! So sorry for the long break! One month of testing and a concussion later... we finally have an update! :) Hopefully it will go faster from here on. :)

-D.

Chapter 16
“And if we hit on troubled water
I'll be the one to keep you warm and safe
And we'll be carrying each other
Until we say goodbye on our dying day.”
“Brother” Kodaline

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Thor had left early that morning, with a storm brewing behind his eyes and Jane was nervous. Nervous because she knew now it was Odin who had “ordered the hit” so to speak on Loki, and Thor was --they were all-- still reeling a little from that fact. Dirty politics weren’t just dirty, they were bloody. She was nervous because she needed to take care of Alannah today and be strong for both of them until Loki could resume his position of strength for the girl. She wondered if Odin would have let the men that beat Loki hurt Alannah? Would he have hurt an innocent child over a disagreement with his son? Or once-son? How could anyone do that to their son? She was nervous because she still wasn't one hundred percent sure Loki was going to recover… or survive for that matter, and it seemed like Thor’s fate was tied to his brothers till the day they died. She was nervous because Eir scared her as much as Lady Sif, though for different reasons to be sure, and the Ancient Healer was here now with just Jane until Gertrude woke up.

Mostly she was nervous because she just realized last night, how very dangerous a place Asgard was. How far could Thor push before it was him someone found half-dead in the hallway? Or did he need to do something drastic like try and conquer a world for that?

Thor had woken from a nightmare in the early hours of the morning and they had lain in bed whispering about it till it was time for him to get up. Neither of them had slept much last night. They had whispered quietly, with foreheads pressed together, as though in confession.

She had learned more about mind control… and learned that Loki wasn’t himself when he attacked her planet. But Thor hadn’t noticed. It was frightening; would he notice if she changed? Of course he would, they were married! They’re eternal souls had been bound to each other, Thor knew her more intimately than anyone… but Thor had know her for six years… he’d known his brother, who used to be his best friend, for 1,214 years. And he hadn’t noticed because it truly had been Loki, just a different version of him. All the same memories, the same face, same voice, but with someone else pulling the strings, manipulating his fears and desires… it sent chills down her spine.

She’d asked Thor if that’s why his eyes alternated between green and blue when she first met him. He’d burst into tears again and confessed he hadn’t even noticed. Well, at least she could be sure that her eyes were dark enough that Thor would notice that, at the very least. Besides, apparently, it

was more difficult to brainwash a sorcerer as strong as Loki, and the symptoms were different, which is why they tortured him physically and mentally for three years. Three years. Thor couldn't even describe to her what kind of torture he'd thought they'd used, or how bad it had looked… he just kept crying and whispering,

"It was bad. It was really bad."

It must have been, because Sif had been white as a ghost when she'd come out of the room.

Jane felt really bad for slapping Loki when she first met him. He probably deserved a hug.

Hey, you're going to be my brother when I marry Thor… Let's start out on the right foot, I want to be family to you…

Yeah, that definitely didn't happen.

"That was for New York!" had happened. Then, I'm not going to talk to you for four years now. That's how they had met.

Thor had confessed he'd been jealous of Loki's magic when they were children.

Jane admitted that she was embarrassed by her mechanic of a dad who wore overalls and sorrow and cigarette smoke everywhere he went and that she would beg him not to come to parent teacher conferences.

Thor admitted that he had let some bigger boys pick on Loki when his brother was too small to defend himself. He explained that he had justified it by telling himself that their mother coddled the younger boy too much, but really he was just jealous because he knew he was Odin's favorite, but not Frigga's.

Jane confessed that she hadn't wanted to go to her mom's funeral, and when her dad made her, she refused to hold his hand the whole time.

Thor admitted that he'd never said thank you to Loki for all the times he'd saved Thor's life when they were young and Thor dragged him and his friends into monster hunts and adventures.

Jane giggle-cried as she tried to explain to Thor her plot, as a ten year old only-child of a single-parent, to steal a little girl to keep as a sister.

They'd confided in eachother until morning, when Thor had left, the weight of the world still secured across his shoulders.

Jane crept into the guest bedroom to check on a still sleeping Loki and Eir packing up her kit.

"Oh," Jane realized anxiously, "Are you leaving?

"I do have a job, you know." Eir had raised an eyebrow the same way Loki did. "I'm not the healer of the royal highnesses only."

"I… Oh, I know, I just…" Jane took a deep breath and glanced at the sleeping figure in the bed. He was still hard to recognize and, though the swelling had gone down and he'd been cleaned up and dressed in a pair of Thor's clothing, the purpled and black bruises had green and blue added to their oily stains.

"Oh, don't be intimidated by him." Eir waved her hand dismissively, "He won't hurt you. He loves

Thor too much."

"Oh, I'm not worried about him," Jane was quick to assure her, "I'm worried for him. I- I don't know how to take care of him… I can't lift him or help him walk or anything."

"Well that would be just stupid anyways." Eir scowled at her and she felt like wetting herself like a toddler. "He can't be moved. And if he tries to get out of bed, don't let him. He's on bedrest for a week. I'll check on him tomorrow, but until then, if he puts up a fight, tell him I gave him a new pair of lungs after Svartalfheim and I won't hesitate to take them away."

Jane gave a nervous chuckle, but immediately dropped it when she received another hawk-like glare. Wait… that wasn't a joke?

"Should I, uhh, feed him?"

"He can have a bowl of soup this evening if he's up for it, but don't push it if he's not. It will probably take the day to heal the internal injuries." Eir cinched the knot shut on her kit and turned back to Jane, "I'd suggest just making sure he has company." She shrugged.

As she was leaving she turned around and said, "Oh, and if he panics, I wouldn't try and hold him down if I were you. He might panic because he thinks he's still imprisoned which would make you his imprisoner. If Thor or any of the warriors want to try, they probably can, but don't get your pretty little neck snapped for being stupid, alright?"

Jane swallowed with a quick glance at her brother in law who looked harmless at the moment, but nodded. So much for him loving Thor too much to hurt her. If he didn't recognize it was her she was screwed.

"You look like a frightened little bird!" Eir chuckled. "Don't worry too much, he's probably in more danger of killing himself than anyone else, as per usual. You don't have to do much. If he starts choking on himself elevate his head, if he panics talk to him, and if he cries --well, when he cries-- have patience with him. The healing tengre doesn't allow his emotions to lie like they usually do, it slows down the healing process."

"O-okay," Jane stuttered.

"Good little bird." Eir chuckled before slamming the door behind her.

Jane swallowed again at the back of the door and turned around to look at her unconscious brother.

'Please don't freak out when you wake up…' she tried to communicate telepathically with the bedridden man. Please, please, please don't freak out.

He twitched in his sleep and she jumped, heart rate continuing her upward motion till it hit the ceiling. He didn't wake up though and she released a shaky laugh.

Frightened little bird indeed.

She ventured into the sitting room to get that book on Yggdrasil's theories and then curled up in the chair that Eir had previously been occupying. It wasn't quite sunrise outside, but the sky was beginning to brighten lightly.

Five chapters in, she had filled another half of a notebook, eaten a bit of soup Gertrude had prepared upon waking and the sun had risen high in the sky.

With a quiet moan her brother woke up, but it took him a full minute to get his eyes open. Jane bit her lip and reached out a hand to lay on top of his. He twitched a bit toward her and squinted his still closed eyes, but it seemed like he was trying to wake up. Her heart was in her throat as he opened his left eye-- the right swollen shut-- and turned his head a few centimeters before gasping in pain and shutting the eye again.

“Careful.” Jane warned and then winced. Careful, yeah, duh. Of course he’s going to be careful if it hurts that bad. “Just take it easy.”

“Where’s Sigyn?” he croaked and her pounding heart shutter-stopped. An emerald green iris constricted as light hit it’s lense again and the inky black pupil focussed on her face. Her frozen, uncertain, terrified face… His dark lashed lid widened and then glistened in sudden tears. His already mutilated face, twisting up in an agony worse than the physical.

“Oh…” he whispered, his voice trembling under the weight of this excruciating waking moment. “Sorry… I knew that.” he bit his trembling lip and fresh tears glossed over the vibrant bruises. She’d never seen Loki emotional like this. The most emotion she’d ever seen him use was molten hate back on Svartalfheim and he’d been acting to fool Malkeith. Her frozen heart shook back to life and she felt lost in his emotion.

“Hey, it’s okay.”Jane cupped the side of his face without thinking about it. It’s okay? Had she really just said that? She wished Thor was here. He’d know what to say. He knew what happened. All she knew was that Sigyn was Loki’s elvish wife and that she had died.

“I should have been there.” Loki whispered, staring straight through her. “I didn’t get there soon enough…”

And here it was. The opportunity to uncover the secrets long ago buried under the cold mask of indifference her brother wore strapped from his dark hair line down to beneath his jaw. He was finally in a position where if she pushed him the right direction, he might tell her everything. But suddenly Jane didn’t want to know.

Loki wasn’t a puzzle to be solved anymore… he was her brother. Her broken brother that she wanted nothing more than to protect from the long, gnarled fingers of icy death that never left him alone. Is this what Thor feels like all the time? She wondered miserably.

“I miss her…” Loki admitted and shut his vision as a sob escaped his split lips.

Jane bit her own lip and slipped her left hand into his so her right could stroke his hair back.

“I know you do.”

Eir had said that the tengre prevented his “emotions from lying like they usually do”, because it slows the healing process down. “When he cries… have patience with him.” She wished Thor was here… he was so much better at emotions than her. She got science. Not people.

“She didn’t kill herself.” Loki muttered with his swollen face screwed shut. Jane felt frost grow over the lining of her stomach and she froze from the inside out. She had figured Sigyn had died awfully somehow…. But she hadn’t figured… suicide? Darcy’s dad had committed suicide… that was her only point of references to go on. It’s one of the reasons Darcy was the way she was. Cover up pain and hurt and guilt with humor and a mouth without a filter to keep her distracted. She had never thought that Loki might have… that he’d lost his wife to… but that’s how it usually worked, didn’t it? It was always the people you least expected to have experienced it that did.

“She didn’t!” Loki turned his head to try and convince her but at the look on her face he burst into tears again and turned his head away from her as he began to sob. Jane pinched her mouth closed and tried to be quiet as she cried herself. She kept one hand in his and one stroking his hair as he cried. At one point he started to gag and she barely had time to elevate him and shove a bucket under his chin before he vomited stomach bile and blood. As she held his hair back and tried to say comforting things, she wished Thor was there. He would have been able to sit Loki up easier, without hurting him as much, and say the right things and comfort the right way.

After that episode Loki was too worn out to cry much more and went into staring listlessly at the a painting of a forest that hung on the wall.

After Jane had regained control of her own tears and breath, she propped her book up on the side of the bed and began reading it aloud to him in a voice that was shaky, but strong. Science she could do… people… well, she was trying. She was really trying.

When Gertrude woke up, she had taken Alannah back to Loki’s chambers to get what the elfing thought her master might need or want (mostly books and blank paper) for the next week of bedrest. Alannah then took a turn sitting with him, and he seemed to be much more coherent with her.

Jane nursed Frigga while Gertrude worked on settling the second Prince and his elfing in for a long stay. Thor had made it clear before he left that he intended to keep both of them there as long as he possibly could. He knew Loki would hate it and would eventually leave regardless, but he thought them to be safer under his own roof and fully intended to put up with any resistance Loki threw at him. He had pointed out that Loki would be too weak to fight it for a few days anyways, which would give them plenty of time to move him in. It was an underhanded play, but Thor was dedicated to it.

Jane was glad for it too. Maybe it was because she understood Loki on an intellectual level. Maybe it was because she was selfish and lonely, and if he stayed she’d have a friend to talk to anytime. Maybe it was because she was becoming as protective of this new brother as Thor was. It didn’t really matter what the reason was, she decided, she was just glad he was staying.

At about mid afternoon, Jane and Gertrude had finished moving the two in and Gertrude had taken baby Frigga for a stroll around her namesake, the former Queen’s, gardens. Jane went in to check on Loki and Alannah. Loki had been sleeping frequently throughout the day and so it came as a bit of a surprise to find him propped up and bright eyed as he flipped through a sheaf of notes with Alannah.

“Which one of us is that?” Alannah asked, from where she was perched up on the bed leaning against him, pointing to one of the pieces of parchment. Jane was a little bit worried that the girl’s weight might put stress on Loki’s broken ribs, but he seemed content with her next to him like that, so she didn’t comment. She came around side the bed and settled into the armchair.

They were looking at sketches, she realized with sudden curiosity, not notes.

“That one’s you.” Loki smiled fondly at the girl with the half of his face that still smiled. The swelling had gone down quite a bit, Jane noted with some relief. Thank God for Eir. “Can’t you tell? Look at the hair. See Nari’s got curly hair,” he flipped to a page behind. “but you had straight hair as a little one.” Alannah flipped back to the page they’d been on. Nari? His daughter? Jane leaned in for a closer look and noticed "Sigyn" signed at the bottom of each sketch. Jane felt tired all over again.

“Did we get along?” Alannah flipped the page and the sketch of two little girls, one elvish and one

half-elf, looked back at them in a beautiful childlike innocence. Jane couldn't believe how photographic and realistic the sketches were.

"You and Nari?" Loki snorted, "Well, as well as any siblings do. You liked each other and hated each other about the same. You were better than Thor and I, though. He used to drop me when he got bored of holding me."

"But we weren't siblings,"Alannah murmured, glancing down at her hands.

Loki frowned and the room went silent. Jane held her breath, Alannah fidgeted with her slender fingers, and Loki observed her carefully before saying.

"Well of course you were, why would you assume otherwise?"

"We weren't related." Alannah shrugged.

Loki gave a small smile of victory as though he'd trapped an opponent in a rebuttal.

"Well neither are Thor and I." Alannah looked up at his sharply, realization dawning on her face as though she'd never thought of it that way. "At least you two shared your elvish blood. The blood Thor and I have are from enemy sides of one of the greatest wars in all history." He pointed out. "Blood doesn't make us any less brothers. I used to think it did, but it doesn't."

"But the Queen and King wanted you as their child! Not as a companion to Thor!" Alannah sat up straighter as she threw the accusation.
There was another silence, long enough for Alannah's cheeks to color with an embarrassed blush.

"I don't know why the King and Queen took me." Loki finally said quietly. "But my relation to Thor has nothing to do with either of them. Thor is my brother, even if Odin disowns me, because that's what Thor has chosen. Nari loved you like her twin sister and you loved her. You may have been too young to remember it, but I can assure you it's true."

"Did my mistress love me?" Alannah whispered insecurly. Loki sighed and leaned his head back against the pillows keeping him upright. He looked like the day had stolen the bones straight from under his pale skin. He looked exhausted.

"Yes, jente, Sigyn loved you. She loved you as much as I love you."

"Oh…" Alannah's large, hazel eyes widened as though that was a great amount of love. At least she didn't doubt how much Loki love her, Jane decided. "Master--?" Alannah started, but stopped when she noticed the steady rhythm of her caretaker's breathing. She looked up at Jane ashamedly and whispered, "I wore him out."

"Oh, no!" Jane assured her, standing up to help the elfling off the other side of the bed and wrap her up in a firm hug. "No, he's just going to be really tired for the next few days. That's what bodies do when they're hurt, they sleep a lot. It's not your fault."

"I just wanted to know…" Alannah whispered to no one in particular.

"I know." Jane smoothed the girl's hair flat against her skull and tucked a runaway strand behind her ear. "It makes sense."

"He's been asking similar questions for years now," Thor's voice rumbled quietly from the doorway into the sitting room and both Alannah and Jane jumped. For someone so large, Jane's husband could move quite silently. Thor offered a tired and sad smile at the sleeping figure of his

brother. “I’m glad he finally had found peace with some of it.”

“You’re back early.” Jane’s heart fluttered excitedly in her chest and she smiled.

“The rest of the meeting did not require my presence.” He nodded.

“Did you talk with Odin?” Jane asked quietly as Alannah began picking up the books and sketches Loki and her had gone through. The skin around Thor’s eyes tightened and he clenched his fists. The conversation had not gone well then.

“Oh…” she sighed. Stupid Odin. Eir was right, all-failing-father indeed. She wondered if it had been this bad when they were boys.

“What did Eir say?” Thor changed the topic as Jane and he went back into the sitting room to sit down and discuss the day. Jane missed this. They used to do it more often, but this past year had been quite the political mess.

As they sat down on the sofa together and began to confide each other's experiences of the day, Jane felt herself relaxing more than she had all day. She felt safer when Thor was here. He could handle anything. He knew what to do. She could let some of her worry and tension go, Thor could handle it.

She let her head rest against his shoulder with a contented sigh and let the sound of his voice lull her into peace as he unpacked his day for her.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17
“He is my most beloved friend
and my bitterest rival,
my confidant and my betrayer,
my sustainer and my dependent,
and scariest of all, my equal.”--Gregg Levoy
****

Thor took the soup back to the kitchen because it had chunks of meat in in and he knew without even trying that Loki wouldn’t eat it. It felt good to know that about Loki and to be able to do something about it. He was proud even of so small an accomplishment as remembering something like that. As the Crown Prince gingerly carried the bowl of vegetable soup back on a tray, completely focussed on not spilling it, he felt his heart wring painfully... but it was a good pain.

Loki was his brother. Loki claimed Thor as his brother. Even now. Thor had just about cried for joy when he heard Loki explain it in so many words to Alannah. He felt like cheering and screaming and jumping up and down in the air like a child and sitting down in the threshold and bursting into tears all at once. His brother knew that he loved him. And he still claimed his title as brother to Thor even if he had no one left in the world to belong to.

Thor didn’t feel he deserved it… a brother should have recognized when the other’s personality had been ripped from their skull, mutilated, and shoved back in upside down. A brother should know how to protect the other from the wrath of their own father. A brother shouldn’t have to fight an entire society to protect the race of the other… A brother should have known what to say when the other was on the ground before him, holding his dead child in his arms and wailing. But Thor hadn’t. He’d stood there, useless and afraid. Thor hadn’t recognized that Loki’s mind was being manipulated, he’d fought his brother relentlessly when he couldn’t talk Loki down and hated him for being willing to do things like these to mortals. No, he didn’t deserve it… but he needed it, desperately, and he was grateful beyond words to hear it come from Loki’s own mouth.

And now Thor had been too blind to see how hot the wrath of Odin had grown for his youngest son in order that Thor might protect Loki from it. Thor wondered if Loki knew as soon as he agreed to help with the plan to aide Jotunheim, that Odin would retaliate. Probably. It was just like Loki to do something foolish like that… he winced as the image of the three foot blade splitting his brother’s chest in two flashed before his eyes.

He wrestled the door to his chambers open with his foot and managed to make it to Loki’s room before he spilled too much. Loki had fallen asleep again since he’d agreed to try the soup and Thor had embarked on his mission of finding one suitable enough, so Thor had to wake him up. Setting the bowl of soup down on the bedside table he gently squeezed Loki’s uninjured arm and called his name.

Loki woke up with a gasp and flinched away from Thor in disoriented terror. It made Thor’s stomach twist, but he tried to monitor his reaction as he murmured,

“Hey, it’s alright, it’s me. It’s Thor.” he smoothed Loki’s hair back and a pair of green irises locked on him. The swelling had finally gone down enough for both to open, although Loki’s healing was still slower than usual since the Allfather hadn’t yet returned the full use of his magic. Thor grit his teeth.

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” Loki slurred with a tired frown, but he didn’t pull away from Thor’s touch. Thor felt guilt coat his intestines like liquid lead, but he ignored Loki’s barb and said,

“I brought soup. You still think you’re up for it?”

Loki sighed and closed his eyes. If he leaned a little further into Thor’s hand, Thor made sure not to react to it. Loki was easily spooked when it came to affection. He always had been.

“Yeah… I think I’ll try a bit…” Loki muttered.

“Alright, here, I’m going to help you sit up,” Thor warned before sliding his arms around his brother and lifting him into a sitting position. He tried to ease him up as supportively as he could, but he could see how hard Loki was biting his lip against the pain.

“Sorry,” he muttered as he arranged the pillows to support his brother’s battered frame.

“Oh, stop coddling me, Thor.” Loki griped, “I’m not so fragile as to die of sitting up.”

Thor picked up the bowl of soup and ignored his brother’s whining. If he had whined about the pain, or the confusion of having his father send an ambush to beat him, or how lonely and sad he was all the time, Thor would have listened. But he was going to coddle Loki as much as he very well pleased for as long as he possibly could. Whining or not.

Loki brought his left hand up, since his right arm was still casted and broken, to take the spoon from Thor but stopped when he noticed that the entire hand was casted as well. Thor remembered Eir muttering about how the second Prince was setting records all over the place; how many screwed up fathers someone could have in a lifetime, how much bad luck a single person could possibly possess, how many times someone could break their skull or puncture their lungs, how many bones someone could break in one hand, etc… etc… etc…

Loki glared at the broken appendage in question and put it back down before trying to lift the shattered right arm.

“No, no.” Thor gently pushed the arm back down but it was enough to make Loki visibly wince and shudder with pain. “Sorry, brother, but I’m feeding you this time.”

Loki’s eyes flared in indignation and Thor couldn’t help but grin. At least Loki’s pride was still in tact. That was something.

“Open wide,” he sung with a teasing grin.

“I’m suddenly not hungry.” Loki deadpanned.

“Oh, come on Loki,” Thor rolled his eyes. “You could be a better sport about it. It will only take a few days for the bones to mend.”

“This is humiliating.” Loki glared in the opposite direction.

“Would you prefer I go get Eir? I’m sure she wouldn’t mind shoveling a few spoonfuls down your throat--”

“--Oh! Resorting to threats now are we, brother?” Loki snarked back, but his shoulders drooped with defeat as he eyed the soup bowl. “If you try and hold this over my head someday--”

“--I wouldn’t,” Thor promised, seriously. “Loki, I would never use this against you.”

“Never?” Loki raised the eyebrow of disapproval. “What about that time when we were youths and--”

“Loki! We were children! I was a foolish child, I’m sorry. I won’t ever hold something like this over your head again. I promise.” Thor insisted.

Loki waited an unbearable amount of time before groaning and saying, “Fine. But only until I can get out of this.” He gestured to his many casts with his chin. Thor nodded solemnly and silently and brought the spoon up to his brother’s mouth.

Loki hesitated again and glanced down at the soup bowl suspiciously.

“It’s vegetable only.” Thor reassured him.

“You remembered…” Loki looked impressed and Thor once again felt to urge to cheer and jump to the sky at the same time as sit on the floor and cry.

“I did.” with a small smile was his only response. Loki hesitated a moment again before opening his mouth and letting Thor begin to spoon feed him.

“How is the planning going?” Loki asked in between bites. “Do we have any consensus? Have delegations begun? Who--”

“No.” Thor growled firmly. “You are going to stay out of this now. I should have known better than to get you involved in the first place--”

“--What is that even supposed to mean?” Loki snapped.

“You are going to recover and stay out of this mess from now on--”

“--Was it a bad plan?” Loki demanded, something hard glinting in his eye.

“No, that’s not what I was--”

“--Did the council take it better than you expected?”

“Yes, but--”

“--So why do you regret involving me if my work was satisfactory?” Loki challenged.

“Because the price was too high!” Thor snapped back. “Because I didn’t think Odin would retaliate like this! Because I was terrified you were already dead when we found you and I’m selfish and can’t bear going through that so often! Because you’re my little brother and it was always my job to protect you and I always fail you when you need me the most! Because Odin--” Thor stopped himself short.

“Odin what.” Loki’s expression was as set and impassive as Odin’s. Thor wondered if that’s where Loki learned it.

He’d seen the same look on Odin’s face earlier that day when he’d confronted the Allfather about the attack on Loki. He’d worked so hard on reigning his temper in when he’d confronted his father, but it had run away from him anyways. He’d shouted and raged at Odin who wore that impassive, unsurprised, iron-forged expression until Thor ran out of breath and stood, quaking before him in unfettered rage, miljnor’s handle groaning under his grip.

When Odin had finally spoke his voice had been icy and hard,

“I gave the Jotun specific instructions, and he blatantly threw them out by taking part in your little political push. I was responding to the rebellion of a dangerous prisoner. He needed to be put back in his place. I would not complain too loudly, Prince.” Odin snapped viciously, “The only reason I let him live was for your sake. I did not have to. I do not have to.”

He hadn't even called Loki by his name. He’d called him ‘the Jotun’... like it wouldn’t even be executing a prisoner, it’d be putting a rabid dog down. Suddenly Thor felt what it must have been for Loki to discover his parentage… he felt as though his entire childhood had been a lie... Odin didn’t love Loki at all… he’d been fond of him as a child as one would be an unruly puppy, but he had never seen Loki as Thor’s equal. As his brother. As Odin’s son. And he wouldn’t hesitate to give a lethal order.

“Odin what.” Loki demanded with the same icy iron in his tone.

“He made threat on your life…” Thor swallowed. He couldn’t say the rest.

Loki rolled his eyes and swallowed a wince when they hit bruised sockets.

“Yes… so?” his brother gave him another irritated expression.

“So?! So I don’t want to lose you! Is that so hard to understand?!” Thor practically roared.

“Thor.” Loki silenced him with the quietness in his tone. “Odin will take my life whenever he pleases, whether we cooperate with his demands or not. He almost made good on that threat already. If it weren’t for Eir, I’m assuming I’d be dead. It was Eir, right?” When Thor grudgingly confirmed Loki nodded back decisively, “I knew what I was doing when I agreed to develop a plan. I think it was worth it. I think the survival of the Jotun people is worth whatever I can give. That was my choice, not yours. Furthermore, I feel that since I took this,” Loki gestured to his entire broken frame with his chin and quirked an eyebrow at his brother, “I at least deserve to hear the play by play of my own plan. Don’t tell me you’re going to take that away from me.”

If Loki could have crossed his broken arms, he would have. Thor shook his head in defeat with a tired smile. He was terrified of Odin’s power over Loki’s continued existence, and he wanted to protect Loki from it, but if Loki wanted the play by play, he made a good argument; he, of all people, deserved it.

“Fine, you win.” He offered his brother another bite. Mentally he began running through places he could hide Loki if worse came to worse… the list was frighteningly small. Really all he needed was a secure location though, he would face Odin head on if need be. Loki just needed to be as far away from that confrontation as possible if it had to happen… perhaps he’d send him to Midgard with Jane and Frigga… he didn’t really want them there either. Not that he thought Odin would hurt them… but because he didn’t want their names racked up in collateral damage.

“So…?” Loki asked between bites. “The play by play. Come on Thor, we don’t have all evening.”

“The meetings are going very well…” Thor acquiesced. “I’d say we have sixty percent of the Council actually excited about the project now, which is a miracle--”

“Manipulation.” Loki smirked.

“What?”

“It’s not a miracle, it’s mere manipulation.”

Thor rolled his eyes, “Yes, prince of tricks and lies, you’ve done very well.”

Loki snorted and gestured for him to continue.

“We’ve already identified which sorcerer's we’re going to use, and the delivery date is being decided upon. The council has agreed to meet with Helbindi and he’s been contacted. He has agreed to come to Asgard to work out details by the end of the week and he intends to stay half a week. The council is also requiring that half of the sorcerers be Jotun… something about making them work for their food.” Thor sighed and rolled his eyes. “Helblindi is bringing their temple guard, one of their most powerful Fairu’s, along with him he says as their main source for the food solution… but everyone knows she’s actually there as protection.” Loki’s face was a bit pale and his voice was surprisingly quiet as he asked,

“Was her name Srusti?”

“Yes, how did you know?” Thor frowned at his brother’s sudden mood shifts. It could be the tengre… or it could just be Loki’s disposition… it was just like him to swing like a pendulum between emotions.

Loki shrugged and then cringed as his fractured collarbone protested. How did he forget which bones were broken? Honestly, how does one forget something like that?

“Just a guess… so she’s coming here?” Loki bit his lip when Thor nodded in confusion.

“Do you know her?”

“No.” Loki responded too quickly. “I just… I know of her. She has a lot of Magic potential.”

“No doubt why they’re bringing her along.” Thor nodded hesitantly. He wasn’t stupid, he knew Loki wasn’t telling him something… he also knew Loki wasn't going to tell him until he was ready. Hopefully this wasn’t like the last time Loki had refrained from telling him something and ended up being beaten half to death. Thor sighed and felt like his rib cage might cave under the weight of his shoulders.

“Thor, it’s nothing. Really, it’s nothing.” Loki assured him. “What else? How did the council take the diplomacy plan?”
Thor gave Loki a weary look and continued relaying the events of the meetings to his brother as he spoon fed him. Loki fell asleep again before Thor was finished explaining and Thor settled his brother down on his back again and tucked him in like he used to when Loki had a fever as a child. It seemed like Loki was always feverish as a child. Thor wondered now if it was that his immune system wasn’t designed for Asgard and he had to build his own.

Kissing Jane and Frigga goodnight, he settled into the chair beside Loki and opened up a book on politics and debate that Loki had raved about as a young man. He’d recommended Thor read it then, “A king should know this stuff, Thor,” but Thor had thought it boring and inconsequential then. Now he was grateful for his brother’s old advice and the fact he was able to find the book still. It had been almost a thousand years, after all. Cracking it open, he began to read and study in truth what it meant to be a King on a council of debate.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18
“Where can I go?
When the shadows are calling
Shadows are calling me
What can I do?
When it's pulling me under
Pulling me underneath
It's getting close
I lose control
It's taking over”
“Deep end” Ruelle
****

Loki was losing his mind. That was the only logical explanation for this.

Whether it was from the excessive blows to the head, pain, paranoia, blood loss, the after affects of mind-control, or simply for the fact that he’d spent the past three days confined to a bed, Loki was certain that he was losing his mind.

He woke up in a cold sweat every time he slept even an hour. His dreams were full of the Chitauri prisons and glowing blue memories that dripped in mortal blood, and the decimated side of an entire planet, and the dead face of his little baby girl, and the gaping wrists of his beautiful Sigyn.

He wanted to scream and run and never stop running until he out ran all of it. Until he was so tired he broke these new lungs Eir had shoved inside his chest and he collapsed on the ground and into sweet suffocation.

He wanted to shut the world out, to hole up in a dark corner of his room and avoid light, avoid people, and voices, and faces, and eyes, and mouths, and everything alive.

He wanted to crawl inside a tomb and shut it. Lie down with a skeleton long dead and shut his eyes against dark and pretend it wasn’t there, pretend the dark didn’t terrify him because that’s how they’d break him; in the dark, in the cold, in the silence, with nothing but his own screams and pleas for company.

He wanted to kill something, rip out someone’s throat and listen to them gurgle on their own blood--- NO! He didn’t want that! He didn’t want that again. That was the blue. The blue made him like the taste of blood and tears. The blue made him relish in the sounds of death and pain. He didn’t want the blue.

But didn’t he? The blue was safe. The blue was one emotion. One emotion that was flexible and durable and strong. Anger and hate and rage and fury were so simple emotions. Grief was not so simple. That was what Loki was; grief and death. Loki didn’t want to be himself, he wanted to be in the blue. That calculated rage. “Trust my rage.” Trust the blue. Trust the fury. Trust it. It’s reliable. Grief is not reliable, it’s fickle. It’s not like rage that can be channeled, it’s a living creature, a beast in one’s bones. Grief had names; Sigyn, Nari, Mother, Loki, Thor, No one, everyone. It had a personality; loyal, betrayed, lonely, afraid, angry, ashamed. It had strength and beauty that was addicting and destroying and it was determined to never leave you. He could ignore her for as long as he liked, but she was always there, lurking on the empty side of the bed, in the empty seat at the table, behind the empty desk, in his empty chest. She never left, and could not be controlled. He

knew he was despicable for wanted the blue back, disgusting. But he did. He wanted it so badly. It was purpose, not questions.

Questions were haunting him. Whispering in his ear as hallucinations… no, dreams? Or visions? Truths? No, lies. They had to be lies.

Odin. Killed. Them. Lie. Lie. Lie.

Odin. Killed. Them. Truth? Hallucination? Lie?

He wanted to scream. Cry. Suffocate. Where in the nine realms had his feverish brain come up with that idea? Odin killed them? Everytime he looked at Thor he wondered. He opened his mouth but all that came out was brotherly banter or insults or nothing at all because that was easier. He couldn't voice the not-truths, the maybe-truths, the please-don't-be-truths. Thor wouldn't believe him. He didn't himself. Odin. Killed…. No!

Lie. Lie. Lie.

He'd tried to sleep. Woke up in a shaking, sweating mess again. He couldn't breathe without thinking of the suffocating darkness in the Chitauri prisons. He couldn't close his eyes without seeing his murdered child and dead wife. He couldn't hear anything but the sound of New York screaming. He couldn't sleep without slipping back into horrors his waking brain usually didn't let him dwell on…

He could hear Nari screaming. He could hear his little girl screaming for Mama and Fava. No one would save her. He knew that. But he still tried to surge to his feet and get to her anyways. The heavy, magic resistant chains snapped him back and he pulled so hard against them he broke skin. He couldn't see her, he could only hear her, somewhere outside his chitauri cell. Her little toddler voice started breaking as the screams got weaker. His baby. He couldn't-- please! He had to break free! He had to!

"Fava!"

"Nari!"
With a double snap and an agonized scream he broke his thumbs in to slip free. The Shackles were dripping in his blood. He stumbled forward, broken hands cradled to his chest. Falling against the cell door he fumbled with the bars, the handle, the lock, anything, everything.
Nari screamed once more and went silent.

"Nari!" He started throwing himself against the iron door helplessly. He'd try anything.

Suddenly the door flew open and threw him back against the farmost wall. His head hit the already bloodstained stones and he slid down dizzily.

The bulky figure in the door was vaguely familiar… Thor stepped into his cell and he felt tears of gratitude fill his sunken eyes. There had been so many hours spent dreaming, hoping, praying that Thor would find him. Would rescue him from this hell. It was always Thor that Loki screamed for when he had nothing left to hope for. If only Thor knew where he was… he'd save him from this.

"Brother, please Nari--"

"Do not call me your brother, Jotun." Thor spat quietly and Loki felt his blood freeze. Jotun. Runt. weak. Abandoned. Useless. Even Thor hated him. He was disgusting."You've insulted me enough."

"Thor, please," Loki sobbed, he'd grovel if he had to. "Please, it's Nari, you have to--"

"I don't take orders from frost-runts." Thor was across the room in an instant and a large hand wrapped around Loki's throat. Loki gasped and choked as his brother yanked him forward and threw him on the ground, using his mighty strength to crush Loki's esophagus back against his spine.

Loki writhed and twisted and would have begged if he could have. Thin fingers sprouting from two broken wrists clawed at Thor's grip desperately, but he'd been tortured and imprisoned for years. He held no chance against the thunderer's wrath.

Now it was Sigyn screaming from somewhere outside his cell. Screaming for Nari. Screaming for Loki. Screaming. Screaming. Screaming.

He had to get to her! He had to… had to--

Black was starting to film over his vision layer by layer. HIs pulse wasn't pushing at Thor's palm now even though it was trembling in his chest. His spine spasmed like a dying snake and he felt his

strength leave his body as his soul began to detach as well.

Sigyn wasn't screaming anymore.

The shadow of the Allfather and his mighty spear slipped thru the open cell door.

"Finish it up Thor, I don't have all day."

"Do me a favor and just die this time." Thor hissed and his spit splattered Loki's purpled face. He shuddered once more and his eyes rolled back in their sockets--

Loki snapped awake with a gasp and scrambled back against the headboard of his bed and bit back a yell as pain flashed through every healing bone in his body. Thor's shirt and trousers stuck to him in a cold sweat. Thor. He shuddered as he remembered the powerful hand at his throat.

"Do not call me brother, Jotun."

It wasn't real. Wasn't real. It was just a nightmare. He let out a shaky breath and clapped his hands over his mouth as he remembered the shadow of the Allfather snaking out from the direction of his wife and child's dying screams.

Loki moaned into his hands and his wide-blown eyes filmed over in terrified tears.

Just a nightmare. Just a nightmare. Thor would have saved them. So it was a nightmare. Obviously. And they were in the Chitauri prisons. So nightmare, obviously. And

Odin wouldn't… he wouldn't…

Odin. Killed. Them.

Loki pressed his face into his pillow, clutched to his chest and screamed for all he was worth.

The door flew open and Alannah came rushing in.

"Master? Master, what's wrong?"

No, no she couldn't see him like this. He was losing his mind. What if he hurt her? What if--?

"I'm fine, Alannah, I just need a moment." His voice was tight and shaky, but he managed to hold a stern expression as he pointed to the door, "I'll be alright, please leave. Now."

Alannah gave him a concerned look and bit her lip, but slowly backed out of the room.

As the door clicked shut, Loki let out a frustrated yell. He reached for his magic and pulled a dagger out to hurl at the opposite wall of the bed with enough force to embed itself to the hilt with a solid thud. Then came another.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

Odin. Killed. Them.

Lie. Lie. Lie.

Thud. Thud. Thud.

That was it. He needed to know. He needed to.

He developed a plan as he destroyed the wall with metal and manic fury and panic.

Fifteen daggers in, the door slammed open and Thor rumbled,

“What in the nine realms are you doing to my wall?!”

The sound of his voice was too rough, too soon, too close, and Loki found that his heart could strangle his throat just as well as a hand. He jerked back in terror and tumbled off the bed, heart pounding like a caged bird.

Thor swore and took long strides to cross the room and come forward, most likely to help him up, but Loki’s illogical terror screamed,

“No! No, stay back!”

He scrambled back against the bedside table and sent a cold mug of tea over the edge, splashing across the wall and onto the rug. He shivered and tried to control his heart beat, tried convincing himself that Thor’s blue eyes looked confused and concerned, not cruel and condemning. His breath came sharp in his chest and his vision began to darken, he could feel the rough palm of his brother’s hand closing around his throat. He could hear his wife and child screaming off in the distance. But it wasn’t real. It wasn’t real. It wasn’t--

Thor was humming. Humming? He was... Thor had sat down on the floor across him, still from the safe distance at the foot of the bed and he was humming. It was ridiculous… but Loki found that his attention was drawn to it like a fly to honey. It was grounding him. Centering him. Soothing him. Huh, he thought through the slightly fading haze of panic, he actually has a decent voice. He hadn’t heard Thor sing since they were children… well perhaps once or twice when he was drunk, but that didn’t count.
It was a tune that their mother used to sing them to sleep with as small boys...he could almost hear the lyrics now…

'If he were to call your name,

From the tallest peak of Valhalla,

You would go to him as he would go to you…'

Thor didn’t sing the words, just let the tune rumble around in his chest and fill the room with the warmth and safety of childhood. The part of it that hadn’t been a lie. Frigga. She was not a lie. Thor was not a lie. The song of brotherhood was not a lie.

'And if you were to call his name

From the deepest pit of Helheim,

He would come for you

Like you would go to him.'

Slowly Loki felt his heart rate lower and he let out a few shaky breaths, focussing on convincing his limbs to unlock from their defensive positions. Thor kept humming, Loki kept breathing. Finally, when Loki had crawled over to the wall to lean against in a more relaxed exhaustion, Thor approached cautiously, massive frame lumbering on all fours, and crawled over to sit next to him.

“You know, it really isn’t appropriate for the Crown Prince to crawl in the presence of a prisoner.”

“Hmmm.” Was his only response. Thor settled down next to him so their shoulders were touching. Loki flinched at first, but eventually relaxed into the contact again. Thor felt warm, and safe, and strong in a protective--not murderous-- way. Loki leaned his head back against the wall and closed his eyes.

“Sorry about the wall.” He murmured.

“Yeah, what did the wall ever do to you?” Thor muttered back and Loki didn’t have to open his eyes to know that Thor was smiling.

“It was looking at me wrong all day.” Loki claimed.

“So you stabbed it?”

“Mmmhmmm.” Loki nodded proudly, grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. “Fifteen times, I believe.”

Thor snorted, “Isn’t that just like you.”

They both chuckled.

There was silence.

It was comfortable.

Then Thor opened his mouth, and it wasn’t comfortable anymore.

“Loki, how often do you have those… panic attacks?”

Loki frowned, “Panic attacks?”

“That’s what they call them on Midgard.”

“Hmmm.” Attacked by one’s own panic. It was a good name for that reaction. He sighed… did Thor know? Well, of course Thor knew… he was wearing Thor’s clothes… there was no missing the brand on his chest… “Chitauri prisons…” He muttered under his breath, but his brother heard him.

“You weren’t here, were you? Just now with that one? You were somewhere else… What were you seeing with this one?”

Loki hesitated, “You.” he finally admitted. He glanced away when Thor looked at him.

“Why are you afraid of me?”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, Thor, you’re kind of an intimidating figure.” Loki snarked back because sarcasm was easier. Simpler.

“Loki, you don’t need to be afraid of me, I would never--” Thor reached for Loki’s hand, and the younger of the two flinched again. Thor stopped. “You are afraid of me…”

Thor sounded like his worst nightmare had just been confirmed.

“It’s not you…” Loki sighed and squeezed his eyes shut. “It’s… when I was… There…” he couldn’t speak about it. He couldn’t. They would find him. They would find him and skin him and flog him and burn him and beat him and break him and strangle him and drown him and torture

him and snap him and crush him and violate him and destroy him and control him and blue blue blue blue blue blue blue blue. Blue.

“It’s alright,” Thor’s hand was warm and soft as it wrapped around his wrist and he didn’t know why he ever flinched away from his brother. Thor was the safest thing left in the world. “You don’t have to tell me… if you don’t want to.”

“No… it’s alright… it’s….it wasn’t you… wasn’t you-- it was a….technique--” He was hypervenelating. No! They could not keep winning! He could tell one person one thing that happened There. He could and he would! They could not keep winning! “A...a… a technique… he… they… they… the chitauri.. Some of them can---shapeshift-- they wear people’s ski-skin and....” It was too much. Too much. He couldn’t breathe, he could feel their scaled and clawed hands all over him… sliding, scraping, scalding, scarring, slipping... but worse was when it was Thor’s hands.

It was like he’d inhaled a hive of bees. He was drowning in pain, terror. How was he supposed to speak if he couldn’t breathe? They were right. They’d find him if he spoke of it. In the dark. In the night. Scales, and screams and silence.

“They wore my skin…?” Thor’s voice was a whisper but it was too loud. Loki wanted to shriek at him not to speak so loudly. They would hear him! But his voice was gone, he’d lost it forever. “Loki…? You remember… me… me… torturing you?” Skin him and flog him and burn him and beat him and break him and strangle him and drown him and torture him and snap him and crush him and violate him and destroy him and control him.

“It wasn’t you.” he whispered. Like a prayer. A plea… tell me it wasn’t you…

“No! No, Loki!” Loki was encased in a warm, safe embrace. At first it was terrifying. He was so close. Too close. Thor was too real. Too strong. But as soon as he let his head fall against Thor’s shoulder he knew he was home again. Surrounded. Safe. Secure. He let out shaky sigh.

“I’m sorry, Loki, I’m so, so sorry! I would never, never--”

Thor was crying. It was wrong. Thor shouldn’t cry. Not over him. Not for him. Not Thor.

He didn’t have the energy to try and comfort him though. He just lay his head on Thor’s shoulder and let Thor hold him and cry. It was sad… but safe.

He needed to know if Ilium was right. He needed to know if Odin killed them. And if them was… them. He knew Thor would never. He knew Thor was safe. He could feel it. But he needed to know if Odin had killed them. He didn’t know why that’s what his brain landed on so soon after this “panic attack” as they were called… but that’s what it landed on. He needed to know.

“Thor,” he whispered. “Is that Jotun Fairu here?”

Thor gave a heavy sigh and sniffled, “Of course you’re ready to just move on from this… focus on politics again… just like you.” could practically hear Thor rolling his teary eyes.

He needed an explanation. Quick.

“Fairu’s use different magic than aesir sorcerers.” He explained, “I… I want to see if… she can… fix… my memories.” he lied. Lie. Lie. Lie. Lie. Lie. Jotun Fairu’s were also able to read thoughts and memories of people from a distance, undetected. And he needed to hear from Odin’s own mind that he hadn’t killed them. But he was trained as an Aesir sorcerer, not a Jotun one. He didn’t know how to read thoughts without physical touch and reliving the moment with them.

“Do you really remember me throwing you off the bifrost bridge?” Thor wondered worriedly. Loki’s voice was tired. His body was heavy. His will was nearly dead. He barley nodded. Thor took a shaky breath. “Alright… I’ll see if I can get her to come speak with you... “ he decided.

Loki was already drifting off to sleep. Still slipping into another nightmare while in the safety of Thor’s arms.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19
“No one can understand me
Like you can understand.
No one can fill your shadow
Because you are all I am.”
“Lost Cause” Imagine Dragons
****

Loki was standing in Thor’s sitting room, trying to find a way to lean against a chair without making it too obvious that he was still basically just trying to keep himself from passing out with pain. It wasn’t really working. He glanced at the clock and considered sitting down… Thor was supposed to be back any minute though… and he wasn’t sure that he could get back up again if he sat down. Thor arrived and saved him the trouble of a decision.

Srusti was following him.

Sound stopped when their eyes met for the first time since infancy. Sound stopped. Breath hesitated after the initial quiet gasp they took at the same time. Breath hesitated. Vision locked on the face of the other with the same steely focus and wide eyed expression. Vision locked. Magic hummed as soon as it touched the other’s and they each took a second breath that felt so much more complete than the first one. Their magic crackled and hummed like lightning, like an ocean current, like the mightiest gale snapping trees in half and twisting the sky up like a knot. Their magic spun and danced and swirled and flew in beautiful, precious, terrifying, powerful, completion. They were complete. For the first time… since infancy.

“Shelah…!” She breathed his birth name in surprise. He didn’t even have to guess why she instantaneously knew it was him. He could feel it too.

“Srusti.” He whispered back.

“Loki?” Thor asked, breathless himself. Could Thor tell? Could he see the completion that was taking place here? Could he tell just by looking at them that they were two sides of the same coin?

He had not thought it would be like this. He had almost wondered if she’d never realize…he certainly didn’t think Thor would... but of course that was ridiculous. Srutsi and Shelah were Jotun-twins. Mirrors of each other. Their hearts were beating at the same pace… he could feel it-- he could feel her heartbeat. From across the room. They stood still-- he’d insisted Thor let him stand on his own, he didn’t want the humiliation of meeting her while bedridden-- across the room and just experienced each other for the first time.

Is this what power felt like? He felt like his skin had been dead his entire life and only now was it alive. He felt like he’d been feeble and weak his entire life, and had not known strength until now. He felt like he’d never taken a full breath of fresh air, and of course he hadn’t! How could he have with only one set of lungs?

She took a step across the room. He mirrored her, but with a limp. They stood a foot apart, almost eye to eye. She was him. She was his twin. His sister. Why had he wanted to ignore this part of him? She was a part of him!

She was six feet tall and broad shouldered. He was six two and a bit broader. She was strong in an

elegant, refined, way; his way. When she walked, she squared back her shoulders and settled into her hips like he did, to combine a saunter with a panther-like slink. Her skin was a rich indigo blue, her tribal markings of royalty looked like art across her flesh. He'd never thought that the Jotun's markings were beautiful… but he'd never really looked at them though, had he? Her inky black hair was wild and tangled, pulled back from her crown-marked forehead in one wild tail holding only the top half back. They were even wearing their hair the same. Wide ruby eyes traced the shape of his face, as angular as hers, and snapped up to meet his emerald gaze in wonder.

"Oh fates!" Thor whispered. He knew. Somewhere in the back of his head, Loki wondered if he should be worried that it was so obvious, but he was so captured by this feeling of completeness in magic that he didn't dwell on it.

"What have they done to you?" Srusti whispered, knife-thin black brows meeting in concern and fear in the middle of her forehead. He felt her magic pushed against his and shudder at how drained he was. The Allfather had taken much of his magic still… he knew it was causing damage.

A thin, indigo hand came up to cup his cheek and he felt his own skin darken beneath her touch. Sudden fear shot through his chest and he tried to snap back with a terrified look at Thor. Thor had not seen him like this. Thor could not see him as Jotun! But his sister grabbed the other side of his face with her opposite hand and he felt energy begin pulsing through her hands.

Tears sprung into his now ruby-red eyes and he gasped. Knees buckling beneath his weight he collapsed to the ground and she went with him so they were kneeling facing each other as she poured her magic into healing him. Thor stepped forward in concern, but hesitated when he saw Loki's flesh begin to heal. It was like having his own magic poured into him, except where his magic was hot and scalding, hers was cool and soothing. Both magics tasted like mint on the tongue.

His bones knit themselves back to full strength beneath her touch and his bruises-- black and purple on indigo skin-- faded in seconds. His lungs finished reweaving themselves without the weeks of coughing that should have ensued. He was healing.

When she finished she pressed her forehead against his so the identical crown markings on their foreheads met. She closed her eyes and smiled, he kept his eyes wide as he watched her.

Didn't she know? Didn't she know what he'd done? Shouldn't she hate him? Shouldn't she wish him dead? She would… if she knew...Their people…! Half of their people were dead! Because of him! Because of his--

'Don't spoil the moment.' She said in a sarcastic tone. But she didn't say it… she thought it. And he heard her…so she had heard his thoughts as well? 'I just got my twin back from the dead, I won't have you ruining this for me, Shelah.'

"I… I think, I'll just head back to the meeting…" Thor was backing out of the room quietly, "Give you two some time… to… get to know each other…" was Thor smiling? Thor knew… he saw his skin and eyes literally change to primary colors! He could see Loki as a full blooded frost-runt... and he… he wasn't appalled by it… he was… happy? "Sif is out here with Jane, if you… need anything, brother."

Relief was like a drug. Loki felt his muscles relax a bit when Thor called him "brother". He wasn't losing Thor over this new twin or his heritage. Thor wasn't abandoning him with a stranger either, he was leaving someone competent there just one room over in case Loki was in danger. Even if it was Sif and Loki still sort of hated Sif… She was competent. He was still Thor's brother and Thor still wanted to protect him.

Thor ducked out of the room.

'Should I like him?' Srusti sat back on her heels, 'Or should I hate him? I can't tell.'

Loki chuckled, "I don't know, I alternate between the two." But Thor was warmth and safety and childhood and protection… Thor. So he wanted her to like him… what if she did hate him? What if his new twin hated his brother? What would that mean--

"Do you always worry this much?" Srusti sat back and crossed her legs with a smirk. It took him by surprise for a split second; ladies don't sit like that. Then again Aesir ladies don't dress like that… besides the point, Srusti was not aesir.

"Uh… yes." Loki sat back, criss-crossed himself. "Yes, I'm usually worrying about something."

"Not healthy, you know." His twin raised a knife-thin eyebrow and he felt like blushing like a child under her obvious reproach. Is this what everyone felt like around him? Probably.

Yeah, so I've heard…" he started playing with his hands. He didn't know what to say. He needed her help, but that didn't seem to be an appropriate jump in topic of conversation to jump to. How did he dive into that? Hey, I'm glad to meet you and all, but the only reason I actually worked up enough nerve to do it in the first place was actually because I think my adopted father might have murdered my wife and child and I need a way to read his memories without him knowing… Yeah, like that was going to just branch naturally out of a conversation.

"What?" Srusti choked, ruby red eyes blowing wide in horror.

Oh, right. They could read each other's thoughts. Well, that answered that.

"Uhhh... " He said intelligently, "I… I um… I," He stared at his blue hands and picked at the black nails. "I think… I may… know something about… th-the d-deaths of- of my...

"Your mate and firstborn were murdered?" Srusti looked murderous herself. Was she really so protective of those he loved when she'd only known him for minutes? Or was she ashamed of him now? To know her brother was not strong enough to protect his own child... To know that his own wife had killed herself of despair because he wasn't enough for her? He wasn't quick enough to get there. He couldn't look at Srusti.

"My second child, too." He swallowed and noticed that the veins visible beneath indigo skin were a dark blueish black. "Sigyn-- uh, my wife…-- was… was... " He remembered one slippery red arm was draped over a swollen belly, soft skin, spread taut over their second dead child. Dried tears crystallized around a pair of brilliant blue eyes, open wide and frozen in death… he wondered what color their son's eyes would have been.

"Can I see?" Srutsi asked quietly and he glanced up at her through the tears. This was shameful. Embarrassing. Humiliating. Was he still being affected by the healing tengre?

"No." Srusti shook her inky black knots. "And it wouldn't matter if you were trying to hide your emotions. We can feel each other."

Loki sighed and went back to fidgeting with his black nails. Why were they black? Why weren't they clear like Aesir's?

"Probably because they aren't Aesir nails, brother." Srusti smirked, but then said more stoically, "And in Jotun culture it's not shameful for a male to express his grief for his dead mate. It shows that he loved her."

“It’s a sign of weakness in Asgard.” Loki scoffed.

“Well, lucky you aren’t Asgardian then.” She scoffed right back and he stared at her again mutely.

“Will you let me see your memories?” She asked quietly, tone going from harsh sarcasm to gentle empathy like the flick of a switch. “I will look at the memories of that child-thief if you’ll let me see it through yours first.”

He hesitated… “Will I… will I live through them again?” It was a selfish thing to ask, but he had to know. He didn’t want to go back there any more than he already did. His twin’s expression softened and she shook her head.

“I’ll start with how you first met her and in those first memories mimic what I do, so that you can read my memories when I get to something that you don’t want to relive. They’re complicated spells, but you wear your magic with experience.”

Loki sighed and nodded shifting uncomfortably as Srusti scooted closer so their knees met and she reached up to pull his forehead to hers. She closed her eyes, but he kept his open and watched her clasp his forearms and her blue lips begin murmuring in the ancient language of her people that should have been his first language. It was so ancient he couldn’t even understand it with All-speak.

His eyelids began to droop and flicker shut as he left the present to dwell in the past.
**

“Oh, come on, brother,” Thor was grinning from ear to ear as he clapped Loki on the back. “How bad can it really be? Marriage is a splendid thing!”

“Perhaps, but Thor! To a complete stranger?!” Loki had barricaded himself in the very far corner of the Great Library and Thor was trying to convince him to come out.

“Oh, it won’t be so bad.” Thor chuckled. “Besides, I heard elves are quite beautiful… sensual creatures.” A pair of blonde eyebrows rose above a stack of books and provided a perfect target for Loki to nail with a hardbound book.

“Owww!” Thor yelped and sat back laughing and rubbing his forehead. “Honestly little brother it’s not that frightening. We could visit the brothel tonight if you’d like.” Loki began another assault, this time with his fists though.

Thor was laughing and Loki was seething as they wrestled across the Library floor.

Thor finally managed to pin the thinner Loki and he grinned down at him,

“Really, Loki, it’s nothing to be afraid of.”

“I- I’m not afraid of that, you ill-minded tub of guts!” Loki threw a knee into Thor’s backside, throwing him forward to slip free from the hold and immediately scrambled forward to lock his older brother in a hold of his own. Thor raised his eyebrows and Loki growled, “Okay, fine, maybe I’m nervous. But I’m certainly not afraid of it! It’s the part where I swear my eternal soul to a complete strangers’ that has me afraid! Does that make any sense to you, you dumb brutish oaf!”

Thor rolled his eyes and tapped out.

As soon as he released the blonde though, he got a delighted smirk as Thor teased, “My invitation still stands though--”

Loki hit him again.
**

'Still don't know if I should like him or hate him.' Srusti commented in his head with a smirk of her own. 'Can you feel how I'm reading this?'

'Yes.' Loki thought back hesitantly, tracing the spell web back to where it originated. He could see how she was doing it he just didn't quite grasp the frequency she was using to weave it.

'We'll try one more then you try on me alright?'

'Sounds reasonable…'

**

The first time he'd met Sigyn she'd been subdued and respectful, the second time was at their wedding and she wouldn't look at him. Now, the third time, he knew he was meeting the real her for the very first time.

He swallowed as he looked down the shaft of an arrow. The bow groaned under the force of her pull.

"What are you doing here!?" She hissed, fear and fury lighting her sapphire eyes up like blue flames.

"Uh… these are my rooms…" He responded hesitantly, hands raised.

"And?"

"And… it's been a long day… so I thought I'd sleep…?"

"Sleep? Sure you can sleep." she snapped. "But let's get a few things straight. I'm only doing this because my brother's making me. I married you, but I'm certainly not agreeing to-- to-- to carry your royal asgardian heir for you, aesir brute! So keep your distance and we'll be just fine. Got it?"

He watched her with wide fascinated eyes. He had no idea this creature was lurking behind that sweet, quiet, meek mask.

"Got it?!" She roared and he nodded rapidly. "Good… uhhh… I'll just… um." Suddenly she was small and insecure as she eased off the pressure on her bow and swallowed uneasily. "Glad… we, uh, agree on that… then…. I'll… I'll just take this…" She snatched one of the pillows from the bed and backed into the bathhouse. "I'll… uh… see you in the morning." She slammed the door shut and he heard the deadbolt lock.
**

'I definitely like her.' His twin smirked. 'I'm assuming the two of you found a truce?'

'Obviously.' Loki rolled his eyes. 'Just got off to a rough start. We were forced to marry each other, you know.'

'Here, try one of mine.' She encouraged and a few tendrils of magic guided his to try a reading of his own.
**

"Helbindi!" Seven year-old Srusti barrelled down the palace hallways, bare blue feet smacking the

icy floor furiously. “Heeeelbiiiiiindiiiii! Heeeeeeellllllll---”

“Ay, ay, ay! Little one! What is it!” her adult brother-giant stepped out of his rooms and swooped the tiny Jotun up in his arms. She placed miniature hands on either of his shoulders and leveled him a serious stare.

“Father says I have to marry Gurren when I’m older.”

Helbindi sighed and began walking down the hallways with his baby sister cradelled to his chest, listening to her complaints.

“I don’t want to marry, Gurren. He’s fat! And mean! And stupid! And dumb!”

“Those are synonyms, little one.” Helbindi chuckled. “Stupid and dumb mean the same thing.”

“Well, would you prefer that I say he’s dumb and dumb? Or stupid and dumb?” she crossed her skinny arms defiantly.

Helbindi rolled his eyes again and opened the door out to a balcony. Climbing over and onto the railing of the balcony, he took a seat and set the girl on his knee.

“Why are you so upset that you have to marry Gurren? He was your best friend yesterday.”

“Yeah! But that was before I had to marry him!”

“No.” Helbindi shook his head. “You’ve been betrothed to him since you went through ritual as an infant.”

Srusti stuck two of her fingers in her mouth and made herself gag.

Helbindi pulled her wrist out, “Now, now, that’s a bit dramatic, don’t you think?”

“He’s fat!”

“He is not fat.”

“He’s bigger than me!”

“Everyone’s bigger than you little one.”

“It’s because I’m a girl, isn’t it?” the black haired child whined. “That’s why I have to marry!”

“Oh, bite your tongue.” Helbindi tapped her on the nose. “Do not mistake us for some uncultured aesir. We do not think so poorly of our females here, as they do. And don’t you forget, Gurren has to marry you as well.”

Srusti gasped in horror. “His parents are making him marry, too!”

Helbindi nodded solemnly, struggling not to smile. “Such is the fate of Fairu’s. It is for the best interests of young magic, but he might be frightened by the whole idea, himself.”

“No!” Srusti insisted, but looked concerned. “Gurren’s not afraid of anything!”

“Are you sure?” Helbindi tilted his head thoughtfully.

“If he is I’ll comfort him.” Srusti clambered over his shoulder and onto the balcony behind him.

“Is that where you’re off to, then, little Srusti?”

“Yes! I’ll make a truce with him. We can just pretend to be married. That way he doesn’t need to be scared. No one else will know-- oh! Except you! Helbindi promise you won’t tell anyone we’re only going to pretend to be married?”

Helbindi touched his crown runes with a smile and a nod, “I promise.”

She dashed off to find her best friend. **

'I like your-- our brother.' Loki smiled, 'would I like Gurren?'

'Oh, without a doubt.' Srusti hummed. 'Go ahead and go through some of my memories while I sort through yours. Oh and this is called blackmail, by the way: if you go through any intimate memories of me and my mate I’ll go through yours and then proceed to share them with whomever I please.'

'Noted,' Loki snorted. 'And understood.'

Then Loki slipped back into the enchanting childhood and adulthood he might have had--if he’d not been stolen from the altar-- while Srusti began carefully navigating the dark and murky memories of trauma in his own scrambled mind.

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 20
“It's so hard to tell which side you're on
One day is Hell, the next day is the dawn
The lines are blurred, you keep rubbing your eyes
The tables turn, now it's time to survive
Are you a man, or a monster?”
“Man or a Monster” Sam Tinnesz

Srusti barely had time to throw up a sound barrier before Loki started screaming. He couldn’t tell if it was rage, or horror, or terror, or grief, but his magic was snarling at the Allfather’s leash, begging to turn on him and rip him to shreds like a wolf might maul a man. The cage around his magic shattered and his magic thundered in time with his heartbeat.The room shook around him and he barely heard Srusti begging him to breathe, coaxing him back into the present. All he could think of was blood…

His baby’s blood, used as a rare dye for the Allfather’s carpets, her dark hair woven into decorative ropes for the blinds. His father, his abductor, his tormentor andtorturerandenslaver andliarandmonsterandheroandvillian; had hired a madman to slaughter his own granddaughter. Loki’s baby. Little Nari, who had dimples on both shoulders and cheeks.

The paint began to chip under the weight of the quake that epicentered from his chest. Srusti was barely keeping it from exploding and masking the sound so they wouldn’t attract attention.

Sigyn had committed suicide; because Odin had been playing with her head for months. Dreams, visions, fainting spells in which she saw her worst nightmares. She sometimes had hallucinations or could be found talking to something that wasn’t there, begging them not to “kill them.” Loki had even woken to her nightmares occasionally that involved her being ordered to kill herself or her husband and child would die. He always comforted her and promised she’d never be in a position like that.

He’d lied. She had.

These episodes were terrifying, but the healers had passed it off as mere hormones… but the episodes hadn’t started until they’d informed the family they were expecting again. Odin had plotted to, “kill off the offspring of the stolen frost-runt before they could pose a threat. The woman that was carrying such offspring was merely collateral damage.” As quoted by Odin’s own memories. All he had to do was tip her off the edge by making sure she saw her dead toddler and begin whispering lies like that it was her fault because she hadn’t killed herself yet and that her husband was next. “She’d do the dirty work herself.”

And she had. Half-mad with terror and grief she’d been so mentally unstable Odin had easily convinced her to kill herself. Leave him. Take their son with her.

“I didn’t want to leave you.”

“Brother! Shelah!” A pair of cold hands were pressed to either side of his face and someone was screaming at him. “Loki! Please! Listen to me! You can’t give away our position! If he knows we

know, he will kill everyone in these chambers! You must control your magic!”

He focused on a pair of ruby red eyes with black pupils dilating in fear. He grit his teeth in that maelstrom of emotions. Angerragehategreifscreamfurymurderdeathscreamkillhimkillhimkill-

This didn’t feel blue. It was just as powerful. Just as deadly. Just as focussed. But it wasn’t blue when he pulled the magic back into his chest and tucked it behind his thundering heart so he could feel it pumping all through his body making his shake like the earth as he struggled to contain the emotion. But this… this emotion was so much more than an emotion. It wasn’t blue either. This potent, powerful, punishing rage was all him. Trust my rage. Like Blue, and Grief--which was named Sigyn-- this emotion deserved a name. A powerful name.

He’d call it Odin.

“Shelah.” Srusti’s voice was cautious and her hands shook were they touched his face. “Can I let the masking spell down now? Can you contain it?”

He grit his teeth, swallowed hard and nodded.

Her green sphere of magic vaporized, and half the room with it. In his reaction he’d sent enough raw energy into the room that Srusti had been able to contain in; not dispel it. He’d disintegrated everybit of furniture in the room. A three inch thick layer of dust that used to make up the bed, the wardrobe, the desk, the chair, the tea cup thor had brought him this morning, coated the floor.

He shut his eyes and regulated his breathing and thought.

'Think! Odin will already know that I’ve managed to slip his noose temporarily. Given our position, his stride and gait, his reaction time and whatever topic of discussion they’re on, I have approximately five minutes before he has me arrested and executed.'

'Five minutes?' Srusti frowned, 'I can’t be caught here! Helbindi--'

'Go, Loki nodded 'Go protect your brother-king.'

'Our brother-king.' Srusti gave him a shaky smile, but it faltered.“Do you know what our names mean, brother?” When he shook his head she murmured, “Srusti is ‘to create’. Shelah is 'to destroy.’ We are two side of the same coin.”

“Fitting.” Loki murmured, staring at his hands, covered in the blood of the innocents.

“Destroy him, Loki.” Srusti whispered, voice trembling with incredible force. “Destroy the monster who killed your mate and children.”

He didn't even hesitate. “I will.”

“May your soul find rest in the outcome of this, Shelah.”

“And yours in the rebuilding of our people, Srusti.”

She touched the crown on her forehead and he mimicked the Jotun gesture.

Then she transformed herself into her Aesir form, wearing an Asgardian gown, and fled from the room. He knew with sudden certainty… he would never see her again.

Sif stared at him through the open door, mouth gaping and eyes wide.

“Fates! What in the Nine Realms have you done to the room!”

He glanced around at the dust. Three minutes.

Odin would kill everyone in the room. Sif, Gertrude, he’d proven he wasn’t squeamish about killing daughter-in-laws and granddaughters and Loki wasn’t about to hesitate because Thor was the favorite child.

Odin would neutralize whatever threats he deemed necessary. He could explain anything away. Loki’s eyes landed on Alannah and he felt an invisible hand choke off his airways.

No! He was not going to lose her. And Thor was not going to lose Jane or Frigga-- fates above! He was even afraid for Sif of all people!

He made up his mind in a split second.

He ran into the room and pulled all four women and the two girls into a transportation spell.

He would take them to a portal to Midgard, make sure they were safe there and then return to explain things to Thor… likely with no access to his magic, so he’d have to be careful.

In a flash of hot, minty green magic he decided his own fate.

He would not run from it now.

Chapter End Notes

Find me on Instagram @d_reagan_fly for my thoughts on writing, fanfiction, character development, character enneagrams/myers briggs, and more!

Chapter 21

Chapter 21
“Out in the darkness I saw an angel
Held back the flood, until the sky fell.
I see the future covered in roses
Waves of gold as the door closes.”
“Sirens” Fleurie

Jane woke upon earth. She could tell it was earth because it smelled like earth; like soil silted water, spring rain and concrete. She inhaled deeply and felt a smile spread across her face. It had been two years since she’d been home on earth. They hadn’t had a chance to come back and visit since--

She was on earth! She gasped and bolted upright. How was she on earth again? Something pushed her back into a sitting position roughly and her hand flew up to find she was strapped down-- no, strapped in. She was sitting, buckled in to a car seat.

“What the--”

“Oh, good, you're awake,” She heard someone say. “I was afraid you might still be unconscious when we got to Stark Tower. That would be rather hard to explain.”

“Loki?” Jane brought her hands up to her head, “Where are we?”

“Uh…On a very big bridge…sorry that’s not very descriptive, is it? Here, just a minute,” there was a rustling of papers and a flashlight flicked on for a few seconds, making her hiss and squeeze shut a pair of very sensitive eyes. “Sorry,” her brother murmured and the light flickered off. “The George Washington bridge, we’re basically to Manhattan now.”

Jane blinked rapidly and glanced out the window and at the dark mass of the Hudson below them. It was dark, she peered at the clock on the dash, it read 1:30 a.m.

“Wow, how long have I been out?”

“Only about 3 hours, there’s quite a difference between Asgard and New York.” Loki said from behind the wheel.

“Wait? You can drive?”

“Uh, yes… well, now I can. I just taught myself how to about two and a half hours ago.” he shrugged but then frowned, “Sif got the automatic. She got it easy.”

“Sif?” She asked.

Loki pointed to the Honda Civic with a bent up bumper ahead of them.

“What happened?” Jane moaned, pressing the heels of her hands into her eye sockets. “All I remember was there was an earthquake or something and then-- wait! Where’s Frigga!” She snapped around in the passenger side abruptly to find Alannah directly behind her, plastered to the window and staring out at the city light in awe, and an infant car seat strapped in behind Loki’s seat. Her daughter was sound asleep.

“She should have eaten by now…”

“Yes, but the time difference and portal travel have most likely confused her routine enough. She’s slept as long as you have. I put most of my focus into protecting her from the after affects of the portal, thus your headache… sorry about that.”

“She’ll be okay?”Jane reached back to push a few dirty blonde wisps off her baby’s forehead.

“Of course.” her brother squinted at the car ahead of them and said, “I think that means she needs fuel.” The left blinker was blinking at a precise interval.

“Okay,” Jane clutched at her head again and moaned. “This didn’t hurt as bad last time we jumped through one of your portals.”

“Yes, I wasn’t transporting five people though including two children. I was transporting two and Thor is practically indestructible, you were the most fragile of the two. Therefore you were my main focus of protection. Besides, you were out of it, how do you even remember?” She noticed he was wearing a pair of jeans and a hoodie and Alannah was dressed street casual as well, but Jane herself was still wearing her full on Asgardian gown get up. She was glad no one had dressed her while unconscious, but for some reason even the thought made her inexplicably angry.

“Why are we on earth!? Why are we here?! Why did you knock me out?! Where's Thor?! What the actual--”

“Two children in the vehicle, Jane.” Loki reminded her with a tired smirk, cutting off her last colorful sentence. “I’m taking you to Stark Tower, hoping you can find refuge there. I’ve analyzed that it seems to be the safest location for you and Frigga on earth, I’ll have Gertrude stay with you as well. I didn’t knock you out, you passed out when we crossed over. Thor is still on Asgard sitting in meetings and doesn’t know you’re gone-- but!” he held up his hand to stop her next verbal attack, “I’m going to explain things to him when I return, after insuring your and Frigga’s safety.”

“Safety? Why do we need safety?” So much for making Loki an escape route, they’d all just been kidnapped by her escape route.

“Because…” Loki stopped and pinched his lips together. His face was white in the light of the streetlights as he carefully maneuvered lanes with his newly acquired driving skills. “Because… well, I probably shouldn’t say it aloud, Heimdall is no doubt watching us and he has to report back to the King… there’s a receipt in the compartment there,” He gestured to the glove compartment. “It has an explanation written on the back. Read it quickly and then fold it again. Hopefully Heimdall won’t have enough time to focus in on the words.”

She popped the glove compartment open and fished around for a receipt with writing on it. She found it neatly folded with precise hard folds in along the compartment wall.

Neatly written in what she now recognized as Loki’s small handwriting were two sentences that made her want to barf.

'Odin murdered Sigyn and Nari. I have proof.'

“Oh God…” Jane whispered, “Oh God, no….no, no, no, please no…” That meant that her father-in-law was a murderer… of an innocent child and his own daughter-in-law… that meant that the most powerful being in the universe she knew of was evil, purely, unforgivably evil.

“Fold it up!” Loki reached across and crumpled it up with a shaking fist. He threw it in the glove

compartment and slammed it shut. She stared at Loki whose jaw was clenched so hard the mandibula looked like it might be about to fracture. His face was bone white and his hands were shaking where they gripped at the steering wheel and they went a bit too fast over a curb and into a gas station. Puzzle pieces clicked into place,

“You caused the earthquake.” Jane whispered in realization.

Loki nodded silently as he filed into line behind Sif into the gas station. Loki had kidnapped them because… Odin.. he would kill Jane and Frigga if he had reason--

“Oh God!” Jane fell out of the car and stumbled over to a trash can to vomit. Her hands where shaking, her chest was vibrating, her empty stomach churning. “Uhhhhhhhhh!” She moaned as she fell to her knees clutching at her sides. She needed Thor. She needed to freak out right now.

'You’re freaking dad might kill me and my baby. Our baby! What do I do? Tell me what to do! Tell me it’s going to be okay.'

She couldn’t do this. War and murder were languages Odin and his sons spoke, but she didn’t. She spoke science and stars.

Loki’s Sigyn and Nari were murdered! By his own dad! She covered her mouth with her hands and muffled a yell. Why was this family so messed up? Why did she leave one broken family for a freaking alien mafia?

“Okay, Jane.” She slapped her hands on the stained concrete, “Pull yourself together. Loki just found out his wife and daughter were… were..” She could say it out loud so she skipped it, “And he’s doing just fine! Hold it together. Alannah and Frigga need you. Pull yourself together, Jane. You’re freaked out but so is everybody else.” She read in an academic journal sometime in college that talking to oneself in the third person lowered one’s heart rate. She’d scoffed at the idea, but now found the absurd concept comforting.

Sif and Loki were fighting. She sighed and staggered to her feet, stumbling over to the pair of dark-haired asgardians who were inches from each others face snarling like rabid dogs.

“Honestly, what’s the worst that could happen, you sniveling coward!” Sif shoved Loki back at the chest.

He only gave an inch and snarled right back, “When I was on Midgard last these things blew up!” he gestured at the car.

“That’s absurd. Mortals are insanely fragile, why would they drive contraptions that explode?”

“I don’t know! But they do!”

“No! You made them explode when you were out here slaughtering them like helpless children!”

Loki paled even more under the flickering streetlight and his fists clenched dangerously, eyes glittering like broken glass.

“Okay!” Jane stepped between them with her hands raised. “Sif, Loki is right, the fuel in cars is flammable and combustible. I’ll gas the vehicles up kay? How about you guys get us some candy bars or something, from the convenience store there, kay? I, for one, am starving.”

Sif scoffed at Loki who growled somewhere in the back of his throat and spun on his heel. Instead of going towards the store, though he threw open the trunk of the Honda Civic and snatched up a

pile of clothing and a wallet. He slammed the trunk shut more forcefully than necessary and stalked over to shove the clothing Jane's arms. He tucked the wallet in his hoodie pocket and stalked toward the convenience store like an infuriated panther.

Jane glanced up at Sif and sighed. "Do I even want to know how we got the cars and clothes and money?"

Sif shrugged, "We needed it."

"Yeah, that's what I was afraid of." Jane groaned. "We can't just go around stealing stuff."

"We're not anymore." Sif shrugged and stuffed fifty dollars in Jane's hand, gesturing to the cars.

"Sif, wait!"Jane stopped the warrior woman as she turned to go. Sif raised a dark eyebrow as Jane grabbed her wrist, but the smaller woman didn't let go. "Look, we're all stuck here for the moment, together, so how about we stay off the topic of 'child slaughter', as you so aptly put it." She glared.

"That's what it is, though!" Sif yanked her hand away. "For an aesir to kill mortals is the same thing as for an adult to kill children!"

"Yeah! Which is exactly what happened, right? To Nari? I'm just saying, we should probably stay off the topic of killing kids okay!? Especially around Loki!"

Realization dawned on Sif's face and she glanced at the window of the convenience store. "Oh… I didn't mean to--"

"Yeah, but you did." Jane snapped, shoving the clothes on top of the car while she popped the tank door open and began to gas up.

Sif watched her quietly for a moment before murmuring, "Are the rumors true? Was he being mind manipulated?"

"Yup." Jane snapped. She didn't really like Sif. She was sure that Sif was a great person and all, and she'd been Thor's friend, since childhood… but she still didn't like her. "And if you go off on an Odin tangent and try and blame Loki for giving in, I will drive the Honda and we'll just let you walk to Stark Tower."

Sif watched her silently as she gassed up the little Subaru Justy that Loki had been driving. When she finished Sif went over and began gassing up the Honda. She was a surprisingly quick learner for only having watched someone do it once.

"I will be careful not to combust the vehicle." Sif nodded solemnly. "How about you go change." Jane bit back a smile and thought about telling Sif it was actually pretty hard to blow the car up while the key was out of the ignition, but she snatched her stolen clothes off the roof of the five-speed instead and jogged over to the restroom to change.

Wearing sweatpants and an oversized hoodie was a huge difference from the yards and yards of flowing fabric of her Asgardian gowns and she felt a little underdressed at first. After wadding the gown up and pulling her hair back in a ponytail-holder that Gertrude had offered her, though, she actually felt more comfortable than she had in a long time.

Loki frowned when he saw how large the hoodie was and muttered, "It was the smallest one I could find…"

She smiled and shook her head, “You’re fine, this is normal. Everything’s too big on me.”

“It would appear so,” Loki had responded absentmindedly, handing out candy bars. Alannah had smelled hers curiously before trying the Snickers, and Jane had nearly burst out laughing at the sweet, chocolaty smile that had bloomed across the elflings’ face at the first bite.

“Alright, we’re about 20 minutes out now, I’d estimate.” Loki informed them looking at the map he had been using in the car. “I’ll take the lead again.” He informed Sif coldly, handing her a Milky Way and stalking over to the drivers side of the five speed. Sif pursed her lips as she watched him fold in behind the wheel and slam the door shut. Frigga started crying and Jane hopped into the back with her, gesturing for Alannah to take shotgun.

Sif sighed again, before rounding a still flustered Gertrude up and idling as Loki pulled forward. His shifting was surprisingly smooth for someone who’d just learned three hours ago.

They arrived at Stark Tower at two in the morning. Loki pulled into a McDonald’s parking lot a block away and hesitated getting out of the car. His eyes met Jane’s, as she burped Frigga from her last feeding, in the rearview mirror. She couldn’t tell what he was thinking. There was a kind of madness flickering somewhere in his expression and it made her nervous. Loki had never been stable, by any means in the time that she’d known him… but there was a powerful maelstrom of emotion that bordered madness behind those emerald irises. It reminded her of the deadness inf Thor’s tone when he’d carried Loki into the chambers half-alive. She swallowed hard. There was only so far that even the two Prince’s of Asgard could be pushed.

Loki sighed and dropped her gaze, as though he could read her thoughts, flipped the hood of his sweatshirt over his hair and got out of the car. Jane and Alannah followed. Loki had Alannah cover her head as well to hide her ears and insisted that she hold his hand until they reached the tower. Gertrude shuffled over to Jane looking sick with confusion and worry and as Jane tried to comfort the woman Sif took up the rear, glancing to either side suspiciously.

The walk was made in relative silence, besides Jane’s soft conversation with Gertrude to soothe the other woman’s nerves. Poor Gertrude had never left Asgard.

When they arrived, Loki motioned Alannah to go stand by Jane and made some kind of gesture at Sif who nodded silently and took up a position in front of the other women. Then Loki took a deep breath, and walked up to the front door; locked tight and dark. A light flashed and a metallic voice said,

“I’m sorry, but Stark Tower is not open for visitors at this hour. Business hours are from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.--”

Loki glanced around for a camera and then flipped his hood off to reveal his identity. There was a split second of silence before an alarm started sounding within in the tower and dozens of red sniper lasers appeared across his pale skin like some kind of hellish freckles. He raised his hands in the air calmly as the A.I. system warned,

“Do not move. I repeat. Do not move. You will be fired upon if you make any sudden moves.”

“I do not intend to move.” Loki spoke directly at the camera. “Please inform Mr. Stark that I am here?”

The A.I. system hesitated as though surprised at Loki’s level of cooperation, before repeating, “Mr. Stark will be with you shortly, sir, thank you for your patience. Do not move. You will be fired upon if you make any sudden moves.”

“Charming.” Jane could practically hear Loki roll his eyes.

“This is a foolish plan.” She heard Sif mutter.

“Your vote of confidence is very reassuring, Sif.” Loki called over his shoulder earning a surprised look from Sif who hadn’t realized she was still in earshot. She huffed and drew her sword from under her leather jacket as the humm of Iron Man’s thrusters whined from the top floor and he rocketed down to them in a flash of red.

“Loki!” Stark chirped like it wasn’t 2 a.m. “I thought you were facing Asgardian justice or somethin’!” A hand came up and began to whirr like he was about to fire.

“I’m not resisting!” Loki’s raised hands closed over his face. “Don’t shoot, please.”

“Uh huh. This another one of your ‘I want to get captured’ schemes? Cause believe me I wouldn’t mind capturing you. Except, this time I think I’ll secure you... in the morgue. I mean that sweatshirt is criminal enough… I think I could practically call it self defense at this point.”

“I’m sure you would enjoy that.” Loki sounded fairly calm for facing one of the smartest, deadliest ex-weapons manufacturers in the world in a red sox hoodie and a pair of jeans. “But I have no intention of harming anyone while I’m here… this time around.” he promised.

“Good behavior? Yeah, heard that one before. On your knees.”

“Uhh… no.” Loki sounded regretful but his shook his head stubbornly. “I’m here, and I’ll cooperate, but I don’t actually have any intention of surrendering. I have places to be.”

“Oh? You have places to be? Well that’s just great, a supervillian with a schedule. Well, I’ll just let you go on your way again? Or… how about not.” He sounded really ticked. Jane figured that was fair considering Loki had kind of smashed half of his city.

“ Mr. Stark,” Loki sighed. “I will cooperate, but I won’t surrender. I am here because Thor’s wife and child need sanctuary. As soon as I feel they are safe I’m leaving.”

“...Sorry, what?”

“I am here because Thor’s wi--”

“Yeah, since when were you and Thor all buddy-buddy? I thought you two hated each other?”

“And you just assumed that I’d be willing to let harm come to Jane and their daughter because of that?”

“Well… yeah… You seem like that kind of guy. Wait, Jane like Jane Foster? Astrophysicist?”

“That’s me.” Jane gave a little wave and squeaked when Tony’s other arm came up to aim at her. Sif lunged in front of her sword drawn and snarling. Loki growled too and took a menacing step forward. Stark’s attention was drawn back to him, deeming him the bigger threat.

“If you hurt any of them I promise you I will cease to cooperate.” He snarled.

Iron man didn’t respond for a moment and his helmet cocked to the side as though in thought. Finally he said.

“Okay, Rudolf, you want to talk? Let’s talk. One wrong move and I’m taking your luscious locks off along with your head though.”

“Sounds reasonable.” Loki’s voice sounded tight and he gave a pointed glance at Sif who made a sign back to which he nodded. Where they using some kind of hunting signs? “Would you prefer to continue talking on the sidewalk in public, or inside?”

Jane was pretty sure the Iron Man mask could narrow its eyes because Loki was getting his face glared off.

“Fine, we’ll take this inside. But don’t think theres any less security in there.”

“Of course not.” Loki shook his head agreeably.

“Kay, hands behind your head, turn around and walk in slowly.” The door unlocked and swung wide automatically and Loki obliged slowly, giving a pointed look to Sif who ushered the other women behind her and lead them in following Stark, who looked like he felt maybe just a little bit cornered.

Once inside Sif gestured for them to sit on a bench in the Lobby while she kept guard of them. Iron man kept his blaster aimed at Loki’s face. Loki kept his hands behind his head and looked perfectly calm. He was nervous though… Jane could tell. He was too still.

“Kay, so why would Thor’s wife and baby-- wait since when did he have a baby? Did he name it after me?”

“It’s a girl.” Loki rolled his eyes.

“Huh, Tony can be a girl name just tack an i on the end there. It's cute.” He flipped his face mask back and raised his eyebrows with a little mirthless smirk. He really, really hated Loki, Jane decided. “So what’s this about them being in danger.”

“Well, I didn’t think bringing them here would put them in more danger.” Loki snapped with a pair of raised eyebrows himself. Kay, so Loki wasn’t fond of Stark either. Great. “I didn’t expect one of ‘earth’s mightiest heroes’ to aim his weapon at a mother and her infant.”

“Yeah, okay, my mistake.” Tony nodded unapologetically, “Why are they in danger?”

Loki opened his mouth, but then snapped it shut. He seemed to lose his voice. He glanced at them in panic. They had to explain things to Stark, but they couldn’t without revealing their knowledge to Heimdal. They were trapped.

“Oh, go ahead,” Sif rolled her eyes. “He probably knows already anyways.”

Loki bit his lip and glanced back at Stark warily.

“I already know what?” The billionaire glanced around suspiciously.

“Not you,” Loki sighed, “Asgard’s watchman...they… he... “ Loki’s raised hands cme to press at his eyes and he groaned when Stark flinched and tensed his aim. “I came across proof that… that the King, All-father, Odin, Thor’s father, whatever you know him by… uh organized the mur-murders,” Loki swallowed hard and glanced back at Stark tiredly, “Of… of my wife and child. I, therefore, can’t assume that Thor’s are safe.”

“Holy--” Stark didn’t even finish the sentence. He spun around to look at Jane with wide eyes and, at the look of verification on her face, he let loose a string of curses that had Alannah blushing.

“Y-your dad killed your kid?” He looked like he might have as violent a reaction to it as Jane had at

the gas station.

“Yes.” Loki sounded like he’d swallowed gravel.

“And… And you want me to protect them,” He gestured to the women lined up on the bench, “From… the king of Asgard?”

Loki winced, “Sorry, we really don’t have many other options.”

“Cool… cool…” Stark looked dazed, “Right… uh Jarvis? Send Pepper away. Now.”

“Right now sir? It’s two o’--”

“Yup, right now! Wake her up! Have her pack and fly her out. Tonight. And uh, um... call Nat, would you?”

Loki smiled a bit at that and it looked approving. He must like this “Nat” person.

“Of course, right away, sir.”

“Okay, so…” Tony let his arm fall down, not finding any reason to hold it up anymore. “So did your dad kill them for like vengeance or something? For what you did on earth?” He looked positively green. “cause um… that’s not justice… I mean, if he executed you, that’s one thing, but your family--?”

“No, they were murdered a long time ago,” Loki said softly, gaze a bit unfocused. “I just never thought to suspect my own-- I never suspected the King.”

“Yeah, uh, wow. I need a drink.”

“Sir you said no drinks after--”

“Yeah, overriding that now. This counts as uh-- unique circumstances…”

“Will you guard them?” Loki asked firmly.

“Uh, yeah, sure.”

“No, not yeah, sure. Will you guard them with your life as Thor would guard your Pepper?”

Stark gaped at him dumbly for a moment before blinking rapidly and saying, “Uh-- yeah… I mean yes. Yes I will.”

“Good. Jane…” He hesitated like he wanted to say something but didn’t know how.

“Make sure I get Thor back.” She blurted and he looked a bit relieved as he promised,

“You have my word, I will do everything in my power to keep him safe.” he gave her a sad smile and glanced at Frigga. He sighed heavily then said, “Goodbye, Jane.”

“Sif, Alannah?” He abruptly informed them, “We’re leaving, now.” And in a flash of green mist, and a slight minty scent, the three of them disappeared.

“Woah! Okay! He teleports! Cool! Anyone else know that? I didn’t! That new? He didn’t do that the last time he was here, right? Jarvis where’s a drink! I need a drink!” Stark stumbled out of his suit. He was still wearing a pair of plaid pajama bottoms and a sweatshirt.

“Top cupboard on the left, sir.”

“Ahah! She did move it!”

“Ms. Potts is only worried about your own health sir.”

“Yeah, yeah, Dr. Foster? Uh, ma’am?” He nodded to Gertrude, “Either of you want a drink?”

Gertrude politely refused but Jane was staring at the tiled floor of the lobby with a growing pit of dread in her stomach.

'Goodbye, Loki' was caught on her tongue, unable to escape her lips until it was too late.

She felt the same sick sensation she’d felt when she’d laid a bloody red rose on her mother’s coffin at nine years old. She’d forgotten what it felt like. An empty, hollow pain. Something pretty to lay on death. A rose, a smile, a quiet ‘goodbye’. Beautiful in a bitter irony. Like drowning in gold. She’d forgotten the feeling. She dreaded what it meant.

Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

> Thank you, everyone, for leaving comments for me! They really encouraged me to post again! Please keep me informed as to how you're feeling and thinking as we progress! The story and it's ending are set but I need your feedback nonetheless to wrap it all up! Y'all keep me going! :)
>
> -D.

Chapter 22
“And I feel the pages turning
I see the candle burning down
Before my eyes, before my wild eyes
I feel you holding me
Tighter, I cannot see
When will we finally breathe?”
“Breathe” Fleurie
****

Loki and Sif had decided the best way to go about this next part of the plan was for Sif to head back to Asgard and explain things to Thor while Loki found a more permanent safety for Alannah. It had taken a heated argument of ten minutes for Sif to pick up on the fact that he wasn’t sure if he’d be able to take care of Alannah in the aftermath of it all. Her mouth had finally snapped shut and a pair of stormy hazel eyes had widened. He had tilted his head threateningly at her and after a sharp glance at Alannah, she’d backed off. She had been quiet and withdrawn the rest of the time as he’d written a letter to Thor explaining things, and sent Alannah to wait at the portal.

Sif stared at him solemnly as he handed her the letter.

“You will say goodbye to him in person?” She murmured quietly, holding the letter gently as though it might disintegrate in her hands.

“If I have the chance.” Loki responded blandly. He was struggling to keep his composure still. He was terrified out of his mind and he’d lost his sanity to overwhelming grief. He was committing treason not only against the Great King Allfather, Keeper of the Nine Realms, but also betraying the murderer of his wife and child. He was terrified, horrified… petrified.

“And… do try and… I mean,” Sif sighed and scuffed her boot in the dust. “Just try. Alright? Don’t just give up…”

He stared back into the irises of war and said numbly. “I will try.”

Sif nodded and cleared her throat uncomfortably.

“I-- uh, I’ll report to Thor immediately.”

“Be careful.” He muttered.

Sif gave him a wry smile, “Where would the fun be in that?”

The second prince gave a genuine chuckle and shook his head. “You sound just like her sometimes.”

Sif’s smile saddened a bit at the memory of her best friend, his wife, but the smile remained.

“I know.”

They both went quiet for a few moments before nodding their silent goodbyes and Loki pointed Sif in the direction of the portal. He could feel her turn and stare at his back as he walked back to Alannah and their portal, but he didn’t turn back around.

Offering an arm to the elfing he gave her a small smile and said,

“Shall we?”

Alannah gave him a sweet grin and took another glance around at the mountainous landscape around them linking her arm through his.

“How many portals are in this alcove?” She asked, hazel green eyes sparking in wonder.

“Fourteen that I’ve discovered.” he smiled. There was a flash of green and Sif was gone. He glanced down at his mortal sneakers and sighed again.

“You seem sad?” Alannah frowned a bit. “Are you afraid that you won’t see her again? Is she in danger going back to Asgard?”

Loki bit his lip and kept his gaze trained away from the elfling on his arm. It was not Sif he was afraid of losing.

“Master?”

“Are you ready to see your homeland?” He changed the subject and gave a delighted grin when he saw interest spark up in those enormous elven eyes. She still looked worried, but he had her safely distracted.

He stepped through the portal with her and in a snap of hot mint, they entered the royal Forests of Regeenoff.
****

Thor could feel something was off as soon as Odin left the table, but he couldn’t get away quick enough. Odin left for only ten minutes and in that window the Jotun Fairu came running back breathless, to slide into place between her brother-king and her mate, whispering something to them furiously.

Thor was standing up, ready to through rules aside and leave the table in the middle of discussion, when Odin returned. There wasn’t enough time to have imprisoned Loki or killed him… with Loki, Sif, and Srusti there, Odin would have been taxed at the very least. He couldn’t have done much damage in so short a time. Thor swallowed and sat back down. His eyes met the gaze of the Fairu and she shook her head.

'They are safe for now.' Her voice echoed through his head and he barely contained his startled jump. 'Please do not raise suspicion anymore than it already is, your highness. Wait for the meetings to end this evening.'

'Can you hear me?' Thor squinted as though that might help him communicate better. Srusti hid a smile at his attempt, but he thought she looked nervous.

'Yes, I can hear you.' She glanced away. 'And yes I am nervous. Shelah trusts you… I hope I am not wrong to do so as well. I am escorting my brother-king home directly after meetings have ended this evening.'

'Before the week is over? What about your aide?'

'I'm sure Helblindi would appreciate if you wouldn't mind postponing. Asgard is about to become a very dangerous place, you highness.'

Thor swallowed. He didn't know what the reasons where, but he believed her. He glanced back up to the head of the table as Odin called the recess over.

Four hours later, Thor discreetly bid goodbye to the Jotuns and Loki's twin. Then he bolted for his chambers and the people most precious to him in all the nine realms.

The chamber was empty. Panic thundered around his soul as he opened the door to the guest bedroom. The room was destroyed, thick dust layered the floor and all the furniture had been disintegrated. The paint had been sanded off the walls and the single window fractured a million times, barely still holding together.

Loki. Only Loki could do this.

And he rarely lost control this badly. Thor didn't think he ever had, actually. Not even Frigga's death had been as severe a reaction as this.

Thor leaned against the wall, suddenly dizzy. His breath came in quick, oxynless gasps. Where was his brother? What had happened to make him panic this badly? Where were his wife and child? Where was Sif? And Alannah?

"Thor!"

He spun around, hammer raised, lightning sizzling at his fingertips. Sif took a defensive stance with her sword half-raised.

"Sif!" he gasped and dropped his hammer to grab her shoulders. "Where are they? What happened? What-- why--? Why are you wearing Midgardian clothing?"

"I have much to tell you." Sif panted. Why was she out of breath? She looked like she'd been running. "But not, here, it's not safe. Follow me."

Thor acquiesced, sick dread tearing his insides apart like wet paper.

Sif crept along the hallways, in a pair of Midgardian tennis shoes, jeans and a black leather jacket. She still wore her hair back in a whip-like ponytail and her sword was strapped to her back; he could tell she was just waiting for an attack. Why though? In her own home?

What had Loki done?

****

What am I doing? Loki wondered as he looked at Alannah's face, blooming in wonder as they approached the capital city of Alfheim. Alannah was the present. Alannah was the future. His

present. His future. What was he doing?

But no. This was better in the long run. Better for her present. Better for her future. He would have to settle for being a fond memory of her past.

He'd abandoned her before. On the Bifrost… when he'd finally given in and tried to kill himself after centuries of considering it… planning it… never acting on it. He'd thought only of himself and his own pain and shame and failure and he'd abandoned her as he leapt willingly into the gaping jaws of death. But in doing so he'd sentenced her to fates know what… there were things, he knew, she hadn't even been able to tell him yet.

She'd been traded about masters for months, abused, neglected, mistreated before Frigga had noticed and brought her back to keep her close. By the time the events on Midgard and Slvartleheim were over and he'd finally returned to his chambers under the false pretense of freedom, his mother was dead and as such Alannah was returned to him.

She broke another piece of his heart. The little girl who he taught to read, the one who he taught to dance with her little feet balanced atop of his, the one who cried when she read a sad book or laughed at his tricks, was hollowed out by fear. There was no curiosity in her fearful gaze, no hope in the syllables of her words. There was no such thing as laughter from that mouth anymore, nor was there trust whe she looked up at him.

She had not seen Loki as the man who raised her, the one who helped her take her first steps and pulled splinters from her feet as a child. He was different than that man and she could tell… so she had shrunk back from him like she did any other man now. It made him want to vomit. He'd rather have clawed his own eyes out than see his precious Alannah broken like that.

It was his fault too. With him gone-- giving up and trying to kill himself-- there had been no one to protect her. Thor and Frigga were too caught up in their grief to notice at first, and Odin was a heartless monster who didn't care for little elflings at the mercy of anyone and everyone.

Loki knew it was his fault for abandoning her, just as it was partially his fault for choosing his brother and his adventures everytime, over staying with his fading Sigyn. He should have seen signs… if he'd been there more often he might have even sensed Odin's tampering. But he'd been a coward, afraid of watching his beautiful wife transform into this other person he did not know… so he'd run. He'd let himself fall. He'd failed them all.

It had taken four years to convince Alannah of his love and protection again. As soon as he'd been well enough after his injury on Slvatleheim, he'd begun sleeping outside her door on the floor so he could get to her sooner when she'd wake up screaming in fits of terror. Four years to win her trust back again. Because he'd been gone for three… he hadn't been there to protect her then… he had to convince her he would protect her now. He would not abandon her like that again.

"What is this one called?" Alannah bounded ahead of him to trace the star-shaped bloom of a brilliant blue-white flower.

"Irenae." He pulled himself out of his fear for past and future and focussed on these sweet present moments with her. His Alannah. The little girl fate allowed him to raise. "It was named for Sigyn's grandmother, the Shepherdess of Stars. They light up at night like starlight."

Alannah collected the dewlet droplets off the shimmering petals and smiled. "I think Jane should have a title like that. 'Shepherdess of Stars… of Lights…' Oh! I know! She should be called 'The Shepherdess of Midgardian Lights!' Because Migard has stars on their surface too, sprinkled all over their cities!" Alannah exclaimed but glanced back at Loki for approval. He nodded agreeably.

“I think that Lady Jane is most deserving of a title her own.”

Alannah beamed and darted forward again but stopped at the bridge that crossed over into the towering spires of the Elven Capital City of Yreuin. The King’s city.

Loki followed and offered his hand to the nervous elfing as they stepped onto the bridge. She gasped in delight as she saw a Fluien serpent slither downstream beneath the bridge and Loki felt sad in a hopeful way.

This would be a good future for her.

Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

> I'm alive! I promise! I'll try and wrap this up quickly! The ending is all written out and finished, I just need to post these last five chapters! Thanks for sticking with me to the end guys! I love your reviews! They are so so so encouraging! Please keep them coming, they keep me going!
>
> -D.

“There are no chains like hate...

dwelling on your brother's faults multiplies your own.

You are far from the end of your journey.”

-- Buddha
****

“You are no brother of mine!” The elven King spat, sapphire eyes blazing in the same immortal inferno that his sister’s used to. “You have nothing to say that I want to hear. Get out of my sight.”

“Your highness, if I may--” Loki tried yet again.

“No! I will hear none of what you have to say! I said leave! Guards!”

“Finian!” Loki roared, and the Elf-King recoiled in surprise. The guards hesitated. “I don’t have the time for this! You will hear what I am going to say! And I will listen to what you have to say. That is how a conversation works! You are not just going to throw me out because I remind you of something you regret!”

was silence in the throne room and the guards gaped at the Aesir intruder wearing Earth jeans and a Red Sox sweatshirt in the royal throne room.

“You have no right--” Finian began, quivering in rage. But Loki snarled back,

“I have the only right!” Loki clenched his fists furiously and was suddenly grateful that he’d had Alannah wait outside the throne room. He hadn’t thought Finian would be quite this unreasonable… but really he should have known.

“You failed!” Finian flew out of his chair, double swords singing as they were yanked out of their scabbards and he stalked over to the Asgardian. “I gave you my sister and you failed to protect her. You were too weak to fend off a single Asgardian-supremacist zealot! You lost that right!” He leveled his sword with Loki’s throat.

“Sigyn was my wife.” Loki hissed, tears blinding his view of his brother-in-law. He glared in his direction all the same. “She may have once been your sister, but you threw her out! I never abandoned her like you did! I would have defended--”

“But you didn’t!” Finian shrieked, dropping the left blade so he could punch the dark haired man across the face.

“Neither did you!” Loki spat, blood splattering his lips and a bruise blooming across his cheek. His clenched fists didn’t raise to strike the King back though.

“Where were you, Finian? After the day you married her off, where were you?” When he got no response he continued, “Where were you when your sister went into labor with her first child? Where were you when she named her daughter’s star on her first birthday? Where were you when she wrote you letters? Letters that never got a response? Where were you when she started talking to people that weren’t there?” Loki choked on a sob but he was digging his own grave at this point, he might as well finish. “Where were you when she lost hope? When she decided that death was better than life? When she was most alone-- where were we?! Where were we Finian!?”

There was silence as the two royals glared at each other. Tears swimming in both blue and green eyes, agony drowning in both of their souls…

“Why did you not come to grieve with us?” Finian finally tried snarling, but it broke halfway through.

“Why did you not come while she was still living?” Loki spit.

“I couldn’t… not when I’d forced her to… I couldn’t bear that… what if she had been unhappy…? Or--”

“Then you should have come to rescue her!” Loki’s face twisted painfully, “You were her older brother! You should have protected her from me if you thought I would hurt her!”

“I…” Finian’s shoulders broke under the wait of grief and regret. “I… I never thought you would hurt her… not after I met you…” Finian slumped down to sit upon the steps up to the throne and Loki hesitated before sitting next to him. “I had to agree to it… we were cornered… we needed a treaty with Asgard and... After I met you… you were so young yourself… and gentle… back then,” Loki swallowed and glanced away. Finian avoided his gaze. “I thought perhaps… she could be happy… even though I’d traded her off like--” The King’s voice broke. “She died thinking I had abandoned her… she could have come home.. If only she knew--”

“It wasn’t her.” Loki interrupted, focussing on one of the metal rings that kept these Midgardian shoes laced.

“What?” The warrior next to him held his breath.

Loki knew it was risky bringing Finian into all of this. Finian could be a clever, and cunning, but he just as easily became unhinged. Some called him mad… Loki leaned a bit more toward the word ‘temperamental’. Finian was a warrior and a strategist. He knew exactly what he was doing. Like Odin, there was a reason behind everything he did… Loki didn’t think him mad. Emotional? Powerful? Intelligent? Temperamental? Yes. Insane? No.

“Sigyn’s mind was being tampered with.” Loki murmured, eyes still trained of the metal circle of the lace rung.

Finian’s blonde braided head snapped up and he hissed, “You mean to tell me my sister has been murdered all these years and not been avenged?”

Loki watched Finian’s hand tremble on the hilt of his sword and calculated how long he’d have to draw a weapon from magic… no, not reliable enough anymore, he’d go for the dagger sheathed at

his ankle. If the ambush in the hallway had taught him anything it was that he did not want to be caught relying on magic alone anymore.

“Why did you not sense it?!” His brother-in-law demanded, sapphire irises igniting again.

“He… the one who killed her... is far stronger in magic than I.” Loki admitted, still watching Finian’s posture and expression for warning signs that he might be about to lose control.

“Stronger than you? So strong they could fool you for half a millenia? Who is that cunning and strong, silver-tongue?” Finian growled, “Tell me who it is that I may avenge my sister.”

Loki bit his lip ad shook his head. “It is not so simple.”

“Why not?!” Finian roared to his feet. Loki sighed, sometimes Finian reminded him so much of Thor it was hard to remember to reign in the sarcasm. He had to remind himself that Finian was a King, and would much sooner have his head than Thor.

“I know who killed her,” Loki murmured. “but I need help defeating him. He is one of the most powerful beings in all the nine realms, and, unfortunately it is high treason, for me to take my revenge against him.” His gaze flicked up to lock on Finian’s and the blue eyes widened.

“You do not mean to tell me that it’s-- no it’s not possible! He--” Finian shook his head. “He is a two-faced coward and a tyrant but I do not believe him capable of… No, I can not consent to any plan until I have proof--”

“I have his memories.” Loki ground out. “Do you want those?”

“Memories from his own mind??” Finian looked dazed still. “Yes… yes that is proof enough. Let me see.”

“You asked for it, remember.” Loki muttered, before placing his fingers at Finian’s temples.

The next time Finian opened his eyes the rage that had burned behind his sapphire eyes had frozen over and his expression hardened to pale steel. When he looked at Loki a shiver ran down the latter’s spine. He understood why people thought Finian mad… he really did. That shift from hot-headed rage to cold, calculating cunning was a shock to the system. And each of Finian’s emotions were so raw and pure. Powerful.

Loki swallowed hard. A dying part of him from the past balked at what beast he may have just created and what damage it would do to Asgard and the Alfather… but that piece of him was dying. The rest of him found morbid satisfaction as he thought of what damage his former brother-in-law was capable of with that icy hatred and cunning strategy.

“You are going to take him out.” Finian ordered.

Loki swallowed back the retort that he didn’t take orders from the elves and tilted his head agreeably. He was going after Odin, whether Finian agreed to help or not.

“I am going to try.” Odin was still one of the most powerful beings in the nine realms… the fact that he also happened to be heartless, cunning and exceptionally cruel only made it harder to find a weakness to exploit. Loki had to do this though. For vengeance… but more than that for the future. For Alannah’s future. For Thor’s future. For Jane and little Frigga’s future. No one he cared for was safe from this beast. Vengeance would be nice, but more than that he needed to ensure the safety of those he loved. He could not lose any more of them. He would not.

“What do you need of me?” Finian’s voice sounded like one from the dead, but his body hummed with tension begging to be set loose to terrorize the enemy. Loki gave a bitter smirk. Setting Finian off was a beautiful catalyst.

“I have a few ideas.”Loki tilted his head. “But there is a more pressing issue at hand, I would prefer to address first.”

“More important than the unavenged death of my sister?” FInian’s voice was so sharp it might have cleaved iron.

“Yes.” Loki took a deep breath. “More important than the avenging of the deaths of my wife and child.” He shot Finian a frozen glance himself. Sometimes the Elven King forgot he was not the only one who had lost Sigyn. “The living are always in more danger than the dead, your highness.”

Finian frowned. “Who is there left living in the Universe for you to worry about?”

The question nearly severed Loki’s soul from his frame. It hurt. It physically hurt to think of those he had lost…

“Not your idiot brother, I should hope.” Finian continued mercilessly. “He’s a powerful as he is dull-witted. Besides, the All-father wouldn’t murder his favorite empty-headed child. There’s nothing living that you have to worry over anymore. You might as well hold vengeance above all else, it’s all you have left worth living for, Loki.”

Loki stared wordlessly at Finian. How had the elven-King managed to disregard nearly everyone that Loki had ever cared for? His numerous dead were somehow irrelevant now and the only thing he had left was an “idiot brother” with more value in the weight of his swing than the measure of his soul.

“If you speak of my brother, the future King of Asgard, in that manner again, I will personally see to it that you find your name next to Odin’s.” Loki threatened lowly. “I will not be throwing my only sibling out so easily as you did, your highness.” He sneered.

Finian raised his eyebrows and a cruel smirk slashed across his face, but he decided to move on, thank the fates.

“Who are you trying to protect then, trickster?”

“Nari’s companion, Alannah. I’ve raised her and consider her my own. I want to insure she has a home here and is accepted back into her own people before I return to Asgard.”

Finian rolled his eyes, “You an Sigyn were perfect for eachother. Both soft with compassion. She’s only a companion--” Loki surged to his feet to advance on Finian, who chuckled. “Fine.” He waved his hand. “I can think of several noteworthy families that would take her.”

“I want to stay with her to decide on the family and she will be a free citizen, not a servant or companion.”

“ Done.” Finian said. “ He motioned to one of the guards who approached them cautiously, no doubt wary of the strangely dressed Aesir who stood up to the mad King himself. “You, send for the Relgen, Olunnn and Prefend families. Tell them the King will dine with them this evening over a subject of utmost--” he rolled his eyes, “--importance.”

Loki ground his teeth but said nothing.

“Is the girl here?” Finian asked, sheathing his swords.

Loki nodded and rubbed his jaw where Finian had hit him with a wince. It was starting to hurt. “She’s waiting on a bench outside the throne room.”

“Jasper!” Finian called to another guard who hurried over. “Will you take the girl on the bench outside--”

“She’s red headed.” Loki helped.

“--to the… uh Library? Does she like to read?” He asked Loki. Loki couldn't help but smile a bit as he nodded.

“She would enjoy the royal gardens as well.”

Jasper, a dark haired young elf nodded respectfully to both royals and bowed to his king before setting off to keep the elfling occupied as Finian turned back to Loki and said,

“There, your request is granted. So how are we going to do this?”

“I have several ideas. Mostly I am going to need a distraction to draw the guards away from Odin. Thor and I will handle him.” at least he hoped Thor would take his side. He was doomed if the Thunderer took up arms to protect the Allfather instead of fight against him.

Loki clasped his hands behind his back and began to lay the secrets of the King’s protective services bare for a foreign leader with a great deal of motive for attack, if not assassination, on the King of Asgard. The further and further he waded into treason, the more and more he found his resolve being strengthened. He might even, if he was being honest with himself, be actually enjoying this a little. It was time for the tyrant to fall at the tip of the sword. And who better to orchestrate the fall of Odin, Allfather, Conqueror of Nine Realms, harebringer of Death and Tyranny, than Loki? Stolen son of the Allfather, conquered and subjugated Trickster, whose own wife and child had met the harebringer of death himself. Loki was always one for poetic irony.

Loki, the silver-tongued deceiver, slaughterer of innocents, madman, mischief and mayhem embodied, would be the one to finally at least attempt to fall the man who had first deceived him, slaughtered his innocent wife and child.

As he schemed with Finian as to how to organize the elvish attack, and Thor and his hopeful advance on the King, Loki could feel the poetry in motion. It didn’t feel good… but it felt right.

Loki God of Chaos, and Shelah the Destroyer, were finally one and the same.

Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

sadness and love.

more sadness.

Chapter 24
“You taught me the courage of stars before you left
How light carries on endlessly even after death
With shortness of breath you explained the infinite
How rare and beautiful it is to even exist.”
“Saturn” Sleeping at Last
****

Alannah was looking up at him now with wide, disbelieving eyes that were brimming with tears and Loki wished, not for the first time, that she had been raised by someone better than he so she might have been spared the heartache that came with being one of his loved one’s. Everyone who loved him ended up heartbroken or dead. Or both.

“You… you don’t want me anymore?” She asked, her voice small and trembling.

He felt his heart drop into his stomach. “No! That’s not what this-- no! Alannah!” he cupped her face and brushed her hair back from her tear filled eyes. The hazel-green color of her flowering irises were drowning in saline, and he felt his own begin to well up too. “Alannah! No!” He whispered, “It’s the absolute opposite! Do you… Do you remember what your name means?”

Alannah shook her head with a wounded expression and yanked away, leaving Loki’s extended hands cold and empty.

“Alannah! Please!”

“It’s because you love them more than me!” She accused, bottom lip trembling as tears streaked down her soft cheeks. “You love them both so much that you want to avenge them and you don’t want me anymore!”

“No! Alannah, stop! Let me explain.”

“Explain what? That I am not your real daughter?! I may not be your Nari, but you are the only father I’ve ever had!” She choked on a sob and swiped at her nose.

“And you are the only daughter I was allowed to raise!” Loki struggled to keep his composure, but was failing. “Alannah, you are the little girl I talk to speak! You are the little girl I taught to read, and dance, and write! You are the little one I rocked to sleep at night and comforted from nightmares--” His voice broke and he pressed a fist to his mouth as he tried to suppress sobs. His didn’t trust his voice, it was breaking, shattering under the pain of this. He was losing her… he had to lose her one way or another.

He could see a little elfling with bright red pigtail braids running along the path ahead of him, jumping only on the silver stones, pretending the gold ones were lava. He could see her little frustrated face screwing up in fury as she threw a fit because she didn't want to do her mathematics and decided screaming and crying and throwing herself on the ground was going to force him to realize how unjust and cruel the concept of school really was. He could see her little hand in his as he walked her to Frigga's sitting room where the Queen was waiting to teach her things that Loki couldn't; lady things like tea, and hostessing and embroidery...he was certain that Frigga was adding weapons training in there somewhere too, knowing his mother.

He could see his Alannah sipping on a cup of tea in the early morning, perched out on the balcony of his old chambers, her hair loose and undone from sleep and remembered wondering how his little girl had grown into a young woman. He could see the mischief lighting up her eyes as she raved on and on about Sif and what a great warrior she was, knowing that even though Loki didn't like Sif, he wouldn't speak ill of her because she was Sigyn's best friend. Her grin was dimpled as his irritated frown deepened.

He couldn't see her now though, he'd turned away from her to cover his face as he cried. He couldn't bear to see the look of betrayal slapped across the face of the little girl who used to grin up at him with no fear, only trust and love. He felt useless and weak. No little girl should have to watch her father cry… no little girl should have to live through a situation where her father would give her to another family to keep her safe from his, either.

"Precious." he heard Alannah mutter and he turned around in surprise. She was still crying and hugging her arms tightly about her waist. She kicked her tennis shoe against the tiled floor, and avoided his gaze as she repeated. "Precious. My name means precious."

"Yes!" Loki stepped forward to gently hold her shoulders ignoring his tear stained face to stare into hers. "And you are! Alannah, you are the most precious person to me in all the nine realms! I don't love anyone more than you!" he promised.

Alannah's expression twisted painfully, "Then why are you leaving me here?!"

"Because…" Loki's voice was reduced to a whisper, but he forced as much power behind it as he could. "Because you are so precious to me, I have to protect you. This is the only way I can do that. I couldn't protect Sigyn or Nari, but I will protect you. I'd rather you be safe, then…" He flinched away from the image of bloody toddler hands again.

"Do you love me?" she asked with a tiny voice, already flinching away from the answer he hadn't yet given.

"More than anything."

Her enormous round eyes rose up to meet his and she whispered, "Promise?"

"I promise." He nodded swallowing tears and pulling her into an embrace. Her head rested on his chest and he wondered when she grew to be so tall. She used to skip along beside him, head barely reaching his hip.

Slowly her arms wrapped around him in return and they took a moment to just hold each other; father and daughter… both knowing they didn't have much longer to play their separate roles.

"You think you're going to die." She whispered to the room.

He pressed a kiss to the top of her red-crowned head and promised, "I don't know that… I have to

prepare though… I won't leave you unprotected like I did the first time…" He felt her shudder against him in some awful memory and winced. Oh, if only he had the Time-Stone! It would set Thanos after him again, but at least he might be able to rewrite some of Alannah's story… If only he had been there… If only he had never been so foolish as to attempt to solve his own problems in a manner that would only hurt her. If only he had never let go.

"I don't want you to leave me at all." Alannah whispered.

"I don't want to leave you either." He admitted.

She sighed and he shut his eyes hard. He didn't want to lose her. But if he had to, he wanted it to be like this. He wanted to lose her to safety and security. To a family that would love her and nurture her and support her into adulthood. He'd rather lose her to love than death.

"What if they hate me?" She whispered.

"I won't leave you with anyone but those who will love you and take care of you."

"What if I hate them?"

He laughed, "Then you only have to stay with them until you're old enough to move out."

She tightened her grip around his middle and pleaded, "Please try and come back… if you live you have to come back for me."

"I will." He promised.

She sighed again. "Fine, I'll meet them."

He sighed and wasn't sure whether he was thankful or heartbroken. Probably both.

"Good. Did you feel comfortable with that guard? Jasper?"

Alannah nodded against him. "He was nice."

"And the servant girl? What was her name?"

"Hanniah." Alannah answered, "Yeah, I like her."

"Will you let her help you find an outfit to go to dinner in?"

"What's wrong with Midgardian jeans?" She giggled.

He gave a teary grin, "They're not exactly the most formal of attire."

"Really?" she pulled away in mock surprise. "I thought you were trying to look your best while meeting the king. I thought the uh," she pulled back to read his sweatshirt, "The Red Sox hoodies were considered ceremonial attire for meeting foreign diplomats."

"I'm not sure which is worse," Loki smirked, "Thinking the Red Sox logo is ceremonial or that Finian is diplomatic."

Alannah's giggle was like music to his ears. He pressed a kiss to her forehead and said,

"Alright, run along now to get ready. I'll meet you when we're both a bit more presentable."

She gave him a sweet smile laced with sorrow and he returned it.

Forty-five minutes later they linked arms and walked down the hallway, arm in arm to dinner… possibly for the last time.

Loki managed to carry on polite conversation and small talk while simultaneously reading key memories from each of the three couples at the table using the method that Srusti had taught him earlier that day. It was definitely violating some legal rights, and was certainly unethical, but he had to know for certain that the people he was leaving his Alannah with were safe. Besides, he never claimed to be a defender of rights or an ethical being. He knew what he loved, and he would stop at nothing to keep that safe.

The Olunn couple were snobby aristocrats who thought that adopting a companion-- a female one no less-- was beneath them, but didn't say so aloud. They felt that it was quite lowly, but they might gain the favor of the King if they were accepted and figured that an extra pair of helping hands around the house would be useful. Loki had to bite his tongue from letting loose a long string of verbal abuses that they very well deserved. He had to remind himself that technically, legally, and ethically, he shouldn't know their thoughts…

The Relgen family already had a daughter Alannah's age, a son two years older, and twins who had just turned five, and were concerned about the financial aspect of taking in another child. They also both ended up on the line of thought that it would be a rough transition for Alannah to make between Aesir and Elvish culture so close to maturation. The wife immediately started thinking through ways her and her daughter might teach Alannah about the culture without embarrassing her. The husband started bitterly considering what young men might think of her if she weren't able to pick up on their innuendos and avoid them correctly. His emotions were instinctively protective. Loki dove a bit more into this couples' past and found himself liking them more and more the deeper he got into their history.

He only read Lord Prefend's mind for a total of about two minutes in which the man simply repeatedly observed what an "attractive girl" Alannah was. Loki barely suppressed the urge to rip the man's head off. He did not feel comfortable with the direction of the lord's thoughts and could feel Alannah squirming every time Prefend smiled at her. Yeah, Loki was tempted to follow this one home and dispose of him quietly. He settled for a few carefully chosen words and a look that could have frozen magma which seemed to be effective in shutting the smiles and odd looks down. Loki didn't even bother exploring the Lady Prefend's thoughts on the matter, seeing the lord's mind was plenty. He was not letting Alannah anywhere near him.

It had been six hours since they'd left Asgard and he knew he needed to get back to explain things to Thor and try and win him over to his side as soon as possible… but he was dragging his feet… he didn't want to leave. Alannah wouldn't be coming with him.

He even offered to help her move in with the Relgen's and sat down for late night tea with their family. They had introduced him to all of their children with Alannah and then sent the oldest son to put the little one's to bed. The girl Alannah's age, Tialeque, had stayed to visit with them and try and befriend Alannah who had clammed up and refused to speak or let go of his hand. He didn't mind. He was ambidextrous and could manage nearly every task with his remaining hand. Besides… he didn't know if he'd ever see her again, much less get a chance to hold her hand.

After tea they were given a tour of the house by the sweet and talkative Tialeque who reminded him of a more social young Sigyn. Perhaps it was the long blond hair in a humble braid down her spine, or the dimple on her left cheek, or the bouncing steps she took that didn't make a sound… or perhaps she was just elvish and he was desperate for any glance of Sigyn he could find. He was

fond of her for how gentle she was with Alannah though. She kept her voice soft, and gave reassuring smiles often. She didn't mind that Alannah refused to respond, but continued offering chances for her to.

Loki helped Lord Relgen move an extra bed into Tialeque's room and then peeled Alannah's grip from his hand to have her join Tialeque and her mother as they sorted through clothing and finish setting up the room. Tialeque had taken her by the hand and lead her in gently, compassion for Alannah's plight written in everything she said and did.

Loki had stood by the fire with Relgen and discussed the details of what he felt was necessary as for his reasoning for leaving Alannah and told the man a bit about Alannah.

"--and she likes to read, she's very studious… will that be a problem? I've been her teacher since she was young, but she'd do well in any program of study… I know there are some opinions about women in education here, but--"

"She'll be under my name and I will send her to whatever school she's interested in. We'll back her." Relgen nodded reassuringly. "She'll have support if she wants to continue in that direction. If she doesn't though…" He stroked his short beard thoughtfully, "Ahh… we usually make a point of not trying to force them into a future after maturation… I mean we'll definitely encourage her if it's a value of yours… but I don't really feel comfortable forcing my children to do things after they're grown." He looked almost apologetic, and Loki took a bit of comfort in that.

"Does that apply to marriage as well?" He pressed.

"No daughter of mine is going to be traded for like livestock." Relgen frowned. "If your Alannah will accept me as her caretaker, the same goes for her. My Juliasa made me promise when we had Tialeque that I wouldn't marry her off to a stranger like her father had. We learned to love each other, but not everyone can. You know what I mean?"

"I know exactly what you mean." Loki replied remembering how long it had taken for him to gain first Sigyn's friendship, then her trust, and finally her love. The wound her brother had dealt her though, had never healed completely.

"Look," Relgen scratched behind his pointed ear uncomfortably. "I don't mean to press, I know there's probably a lot to this situation you can't tell me… I can't imagine what it would take for me to leave my Tia with any other family…" Loki winced as the comment cut through is heart like a lance. "But I… I need to know-- I mean, you don't have to answer but for a 'yes' or 'no' to this… I don't need specifics, but your...your Alannah is afraid of me. I can tell. Is she afraid of most men?"

Loki hesitated, studying Relgen for another long moment before finally deciding to nod slightly.

"She's been hurt by someone then?"

Again Loki hesitated and studied before nodding again and murmuring, "She's generally afraid and suspicious of most men now, it's nothing personal."

Relgen watched as Loki struggled to keep his emotions off his face.

A pair of steely grey eyes locked onto his and he promised Loki, "I will do everything in my power to keep her safe and loved."

"Thank you." Loki glanced away from the steely eyes to hide the tears welling up in his. This was one of the hardest things he'd ever done in his life.

“Alright.” Lady Relgen came back into the living room with the two girls in tow. Tialeque was still holding Alannah’s hand and when she whispered something in Alannah’s ear the red head gave a shy smile and nodded.

Loki took a deep breath. He felt like this was a safe place to leave Alannah.

It had been nine hours since he’d left Asgard. Thor would be waiting for him for several hours now. He sighed and met Alannah’s gaze. She gave him a pained look as she read his expression. Lord Relgen took his wife and daughter each by the hand and lead them out of the sitting room to give Loki and his little girl one last moment together.

She stood across the room from him. A nearly grown woman. A beautiful she-elf, finally dressed in the attire of her people. Her long red hair was back in a simple braid down her back like Tialeque’s now… he knew that on her wedding day it would be beaded with silver and jade in hundreds of tightly woven braids. He knew she’d be beautiful in her wedding gown and knew he wouldn’t be there to give her away or dance with her one more time.

He wouldn’t get to watch her marvel over her own baby one day as she held their tiny hand or kissed their little nose. He wouldn’t get to meet her for the holiday’s and watch her run her own home. He wouldn’t get to watch her graduate with a degree that almost matched her intellect. He wouldn’t get to watch her recover or heal and blossom into maturity, and he wouldn’t get another chance, most likely, after this to protect her or hold her close.

As they held onto each other for the last time, the only survivors of their little broken family, they held back their tears for later, so their last moments together wouldn’t be of weeping. She was still clinging to hope that he would make it back to her and he was just clinging to her.

“I do love you, Alannah--” His voice was tight and strangled.

“I know,” Alannah whispered back, “And I know you’ll stay with me.”

Loki swallowed hard but didn’t correct her. He couldn’t bear to explain in so many words; that now that he had something to live for, and that perhaps he didn’t want to die, he was fairly certain that he was not going to come home from this battle. Every battle he’d ever fought in Asgard had ended in the deaths of someone he loved. He lost more family at home than on the field of battle. He would not lose Thor… and that only left himself; not that he loved himself, but that he was the only alternative option. Fate had a tendency of recycling already used threads over and over again.

But Alannah meant something different and she was explaining it now.

“You know how you taught me about how long stars shine, even after they’re actually gone?”

He nodded, still not trusting his voice.

“Well, love is like starlight. That’s what Sigyn told you right? That’s why love is always with you, why the elves know that their ancestors love them? Because love is like starlight. It lasts for a long, long time… even when the person who loves you is… gone.”

Chapter 25

Chapter 25

“ Being his real brother
I could feel I live in his shadows,
but I never have and I do not now.
I live in his glow.”

– Michael Morpurgo

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There was a hole in Loki’s chest when he left Alannah and forced his feet out of the city and through the forest paths to the portal. It wasn’t empty though. The hole in his chest was brimming over. Bleeding out. It was agony. It was an ending.

Silently he bent down to pick an Irenae flower, now glowing like starlight in the night and tucked it into the pocket of his sweatshirt. Finally with a heavy sigh, and a flash of hot, green mint, he stepped through the portal.

There was a sudden drop and his stomach plummeted below his toes as he fell. Black and deep, dark blue flooded his sight and the occasional glance of purple and green made him nauseous. His head spun and his muscles constricted tightly about his bones until he could scarcely breathe. It was no wonder he was one of the only creatures who knew these paths… no one else was mad enough to explore them.

It was over in a split, extremely uncomfortable, second, and he stumbled out into a mountainous region of Asgard. Ancient ruins lay here, just over that crest to his right, but there was a fire built in the little clearing of gravel he’d stumbled into and there were a few people already steadying him as he struggled to gain his balance.

Fandral and Volstagg were on either side of him, the former blabbering about something of likely no importance whatsoever, and the latter continually asking him if he was alright. He made eye contact with Sif crouching across the fire from him who was quietly conversing with thor before he’d stumbled through. His eyes flicked from Sif to his brother who rose up in one smooth movement and stepped over the fire to reach him. Loki took an involuntary step backwards with that immediate panic that was illogical but frustratingly potent.

He felt Odin’s cap on his magic snap shut as soon as he had reoriented himself on Asgard and gasped as that white hot pain lit every nerve afire for a split second. His knees buckled and it was Thor who caught him and eased him to the ground. But of course it was Thor. Why was he ever afraid of Thor again? Was there a logical reason behind that?

He shook his head and motioned to Thor that he didn’t need to lie down, he was just fine sitting. Thor was crouching in front of him with a look of concern written across his face and had a hand at the base of his neck. Loki hated when he did that, being manhandled wasn’t his favorite thing in the world, for obvious reasons. He frowned and pulled away from his older brother, who didn’t catch the hint and grasped at the back of his head to make him look at him.

“Are you alright? Are you in pain?”

“No! It was just for a moment there, Odin took my magic-- Thor please stop pulling at my hair, that

hurts."

"Sorry." Thor pulled back and started fidgeting with his hands like he didn't know how to communicate without them. "You- you're sure you're alright?"

Loki thought of Alannah and didn't respond. He was far from alright. That would only worry Thor though. He sighed instead of responding and rubbed at his sore jaw.

"Who hit you?" Thor growled and Loki rolled his eyes.

"Thor, really I'm not made of glass. It was Finian, the elven King."

"Sigyn's brother?" A dark cloud brewed behind Thor's blue eyes and the air tasted like electricity. Thor knew then. Loki nodded wordlessly. "So we have the backing of the elves?"

"We? Does that mean you're taking my side?" Loki verified.

Thor shook his head in bitter resignation, "Of course I'm taking your side, Loki! Odin murdered-- Yes, of course I'm on your side… it's just… not one should… families aren't supposed to have to take sides… especially in war… it's just… it's not right. You didn't choose this war, though. Odin did." Thor stated firmly. "So do we have the backing of the elves?"

Loki felt equally grateful, touched and afraid. He was so grateful for his brother sometimes-- though there was an equal amount of frustration and hate in there as well-- but he couldn't bear the thought of losing him in this… He wouldn't, he decided firmly. He just wouldn't.

"Yes, they have an attack prepared that I designed with King Finian while under a cloak from Heimdall's sight. Obviously he can see me now because," he held up his empty hands, "No magic. But he can't inform Odin of the plan since he doesn't know it. He can inform him that there is a plan, but it won't do any good. They won't be able to avoid the fallout."

Thor nodded and reached back to accept a steaming mug of tea and offered it to Loki who took it to calm his nerves. Thor shifted to sit next to him and Fandral and Volstagg also joined them around the fire. Except for to offer him a mug of tea, Sif hadn't made eye contact the whole time. He wondered with a sudden freeze if she'd told Thor that Loki didn't think he'd make it.

No. He decided. If she had, Thor wouldn't be discussing plans of attack with him, he'd be trying to stuff Loki under a rock somewhere to keep him "safe". Loki suddenly appreciated Sif's silence and looked away from her as well, taking a sip of the scalding tea with a wince.

"You left Alannah there?" Thor verified.

"Uh, yes, for cultural experience. She's nearly to the age of maturation and she hasn't been to her homeland since she was an infant. She'll be safe and continue her education in a new way." Loki shrugged. "I hope it is enjoyable to her… it should keep her from worrying too much, too." The lie fell easily off his tongue but his insides cringed. Lying had always been so much easier than the truth for him…

Thor chuckled and believed him; honest, gullible, fool. Loki smirked affectionately at him but glanced back at his tea quickly, before Thor could realize there was a sadness in his smile.

He felt Heimdall's gaze focus on them like the pulling of a chord and he decided now was his best chance.

"Alright, there will be a distraction tomorrow and I need the three of you," he gestured to Sif,

Fandral and Volstagg, “To take the south entrance to make sure that the Lords and Ladies of the courts and the servants have a safe passage to flee through. The elves are under instruction not to harm civilians, but accidents happen, so make sure they get out the South entrance. Thor you take the East wing and I will take the West, Odin will flee to the safe room in one wing or the other and whoever he makes it to will try and contain him--”

Thor snapped around to glare at Loki and demanded, “I want the West wing.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Loki layered the innocent look on too thick to make it so that Thor might feel like he’d caught the younger in a trap, unrealizing that he’d just stepped into a snare himself.

“Odin will flee to the West and you know it. I have the best shot at defeating him, I mean no offense,” he raised his hand in defense. “Loki I have mjolnir, an equal in weaponry to Gungnir. I have the best chance at defeating him, I don’t want you taking him head on.”

“Thor, Sigyn was my wife,” Loki pretended to fight Thor on the subject. “And Nari was my daughter! Vengeance belongs to me.” He spat, clenching his fist around his cup to add to the effect.

“Loki, please!” Thor turned to grip at his brothers shoulders and Loki resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Oh, look, we’re feeling something strongly again. What should we do? Let’s grab something! “Let me protect you! Let me do my job as your older brother for once! Please let me do this for you. I want you safe.”

Guilt struck through Loki’s lungs like a lance, but he refused to let it influence his previous made decision. He knew it would be cruel to do this to Thor… and he knew it was probably selfish…. But Thor would eventually recover if he lost Loki. He had Jane and a little baby girl who was going to grow up to be heir of the throne someday. He had a future. Loki had just left his only piece of future with the elves.

Yes, it was cruel to do this to Thor. yes, it would most likely break his heart… But if Loki lost Thor… he had nothing left to live for anyways. No one in the world left to love. Alannah was better off with a real family to love her and support her. No, he wouldn’t survive losing Thor… but Thor would be wounded, but not fallen. He would survive.

After a long time pretending to wrestle with the idea he feigned a grudging acceptance and finally said,

“Fine, you can take the West, I’ll go to the East in case he changes it up. On the off chance…” he added bitterly.

Thor nodded with satisfaction and Loki felt that guilt slick his stomach again at the look of triumph on his brother’s face. Heimdall was watching. He was bound to the King. He would inform Odin of the plot and Odin--predictably enough-- would go after Loki. He’d find a non-lethal solution for Thor, if at all possible, and immediately head for Loki to terminate him.

The trap was set. Ironically enough, Loki was the bait to his own trap.

“What time do we leave tomorrow?” Sif asked tonelessly, no doubt having figured out what Loki was doing. She was always the clever one. Like Sigyn.

'You know what, Sif?' A voice snarked in the back of his head, 'I know I’m a terrible person and a two faced liar. Thanks for reminding me of the obvious. Really needed that dash of oh-so-helpful scorning of my character.'

“Day break.” he said. “It will take us the morning to make it down the mountain pass by the river.”

The others nodded agreeably and Fandral feigned an exaggerated yawn, “Well, I think all that sceming’s worn a few of us out…” he nudged Volstagg to snapped awake with a,

“Wha! I wassn’sleepn. ’”

“What was the last that you heard?” Loki rolled his eyes. He probably should give Volstagg a break of all of them. Fathering six children, three of whom had violent night terrors was a fairly decent excuse for being drowsy.

“Uh, we’re helping citizens through the South entrance?” Volstagg guessed.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much it.” Fandral shrugged, stretching himself out like a cat. “The rest was just the princes playing pecking order again.”

“Oh?” Volstagg gave a sleepy grin, “Who won this time?”

“Thor, of course.” Fandral pushed his sleeping roll out with the head by the fire.
Sif’s gaze finally met Loki’s and he was surprised at how sad it was. He frowned and she just shook her head with a small smile.

“Oh, be a better sport about it, lad.” Volstagg chuckled at Loki’s frown, thinking it was for the quarrel that he had supposedly lost. “He always wins, you might as well just accept it.”

Loki rolled his eyes and pretended to brood a bit before asking,

“Did anyone bring me armor?”

Sif gestured to a pack that Thor grabbed and handed to Loki who sorted through it to make sure everything was in order. His mother’s short swords were in there as well and he fingered their dusty blue hilts nostalgically before glancing up at Sif and his brother in confusion.

“You’re trained just as well with double swords.” Thor shrugged.

“And you didn’t honestly think we’d let you go into this one with your tiny little daggers, did you?” Sif rolled her eyes and stabbed a charcoal log with the stick in her hand aggressively. She was anxious… probably his fault. He was the reason her best friend was dead and was probably going to break her next best friend's, Thor’s , heart tomorrow. Yeah. Definitely his fault.

“My ‘tiny little daggers’ have served me perfectly well thus far.” Loki rolled his eyes, but nodded in thanks to the Goddess of War anyways.

He got a jerky nod in return but she was back to avoiding his gaze. Volstagg and Thor were already stretched out on their mats, snoring, but Fandral frowned at the exchange between Mischief and War and opened his mouth to inquire when Sif and Loki simultaneously said,

“Good night.” and turned away from the fire to roll into their wraps with their backs to the conscious blonde.

Fandral redoubled his frown and did a double take… but after their breathing softened and deepened in feigned-- he knew they were faking, it was Sif and Loki, they always did that when they weren’t interested in speaking on a matter further-- he decided to give up. He trusted Loki about as far as he could throw him, but he trusted Sif with his life, and he knew she wouldn’t be in conspiracy with Loki over something truly dangerous. He gave a disappointed and neglected huff though, that he wasn’t in on it and threw himself back onto his mat next to Volstagg who snored like a bilgesnipe. Better that Thor though. The Thunderer could snore like no one else sometimes.

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Thor woke up in the middle of the night when the stars of the Realms were brightest and the air had a crisp chill to it. The fire was fresh surprisingly, and as he rolled over to see who was tending to it, he noticed Loki was not on his mat. Thor bolted upright, heart hammering in his ribcage like mjolnir as he searched for his brother. He had just gotten him back! He could not lose him now!

Loki wasn't in the campsite at all. Thor surged to his feet and groped around for his cloak.

"Thor." He heard Sif murmur. He snapped back around and finally registered that it was she who was tending to the fire. She wordlessly pointed to the rim of the crest where the lean silhouette of his brother could be seen leaning against a large boulder. Thor let out a relieved sigh and felt his shoulders drop. Loki was fine. Just an insomniac. He knew that. Honestly, why was he so easily spooked these days?

"Thank you," He murmured to the warrior maiden who just shrugged and went back to tending the fire. He frowned. She was exceptionally quiet recently. Then again it was only 2 or 3 in the morning, he shouldn't expect her to be chattering, should he?

He brushed off the concern, making a mental note to check in with her before they left the mountains and set of to find a ledge to start his climb up to Loki. It was a steep climb, but then again, Loki liked to climb. Thor preferred to fly, personally, but Loki had preferred to climb since before he could walk. He remembered being send on solo missions by their mother to fetch Loki down from some high place that was too difficult or small for an adult to navigate. It wasn't because Loki couldn't climb down, it was just that he wouldn't. He liked to find a perch and then just sit there and watch life carry on beneath him or the stars rotate in the sky above him.

He was looking up at the stars this time, when Thor finally summited and eased over to sit next to him on the ledge. Loki glanced back at him quickly but looked away just as rapidly. Probably to hide tears. How funny… no it wasn't exactly funny… but neither was it strange… how interesting, then, it was that Thor sought people out to grieve and Loki climbed as far away as he could from people to grieve.

Thor didn't say anything, he just sat on the ridge, shoulder brushing his brothers and feet dangling into the inky valley beneath them. Thor looked down at the ground. Loki looked up at the stars.

He thought of many things to say… small things like, 'did you know they have characters in Midgardian movies named 'skywalker'? I thought it funny. I think this George Lucas was borrowing from the myths about you.' Or serious things like, 'thank you for saving my wife and daughter… I can not thank you enough. I wish I had been able to save yours.' Or bittersweet things like, 'Do you remember how Nari used to say my name?'

But even thinking such things stilled his tongue. He couldn't find words to say… and figured that he would only make things worse if he did. Perhaps simply sitting here on the ridge with his brother would be a small comfort?

Eventually Thor ended up falling into a valley of memories himself. He remembered Loki escorting Sigyn to breakfast while they were still newlyweds. How he seemed to step around her as though on glass. How she would flinch away from everyone who spoke to her, including her new husband. She had heard stories all growing up about the brutish ways of the Aesir and was terrified to be married to one. Ironically enough, she had married one of the gentlest ones… back then the most harm Loki would do was an simple prank. Loki was nearly as dangerous a foe as Thor now, even, perhaps, crueler and sharper… but he couldn't help but wonder if that hurt Loki as much as it did those around him. It wasn't his natural state.

He remembered Loki leaving training early to take Sigyn for walks through the garden and finding his brother skipping his mathematics lessons (which was unheard of) in the library, devouring literature on love, falling in it, and how to master it. Thor had laughed at him then, but a part of him had always admired Loki's endeavor. He'd found himself married to a complete stranger who hated and feared him, but instead of take it personally he'd studied it like it was an equation with an answer and strove to find a way to fall in love with his wife and make himself lovable to her.

Thor also remembered breakfasts when Loki and Sigyn and come in hand in hand with smiles and quiet whispers for each other. He remembered finding them in the library, curled up next to each other with their books pushed to the side as they slept in each-others arms. He had thought it almost romantic… for intellectuals. And he'd jokingly told Loki so. Loki had pretended to be angry and they'd wrestled like boys again for a while, but when they lay side by side on the sparring mat staring up at the painted ceilings Loki had given a breathless laugh and said,

"Do you know how unbelievably lucky I was Thor? I mean of all the women in the nine realms, I got to marry her! She likes books and riding, and sketching flowers and archery. I mean… how do you even find a woman like that? And I found her after I married her! How lucky am I?" He'd closed his eyes with a sweet smile and Thor had waited for a moment just letting that sink in.

Thor had had many romances in his life thus far… but he'd never considered marriage. Loki had been too caught up in books and stars to look at women before this… and yet his brother was right. He was lucky. Sigyn was his match. She shared some of his interests and balanced others out with her separate ones. She was sweet and shy, but fierce and just. Loki had been cunning and sly, but gentle and considerate. She brought out things in his brother people had never seen before.

Thor had decided right then and there that he would not marry, until he found someone who matched him like Sigyn matched Loki. Even Odin had started worrying when Thor continually started relationships but never finished them. But Thor was patient. He had a long time to wait to find the right person. It wasn't until he met Jane that he was certain he'd found a woman who could balance him like Loki's wife had done for him. He had never told Loki that he'd taught him such a valuable lesson just by his example, and he wondered if he should now.

But then came the thought of little Nari and seeing her toddle across the room to him, pudgy little fingers outstretched for her 'Unka Tor'. He swallowed hard and his tongue remained silent. He found a rock to grab and fidget with.

Nari, with her father's inky black curls and mother's brilliant blue eyes. Nari, who would give a delighted little squeal when Loki swooped her off the floor and spun around the room with her, or how he would press kisses to the dimples on her shoulders every time he could see them. Nari, who had frightened all of them with her extreme power even as a toddler… everyone but Loki, who had put his foot down and insisted that Sigyn and he could handle it; that he would teach her and all the rest of the family need do was just love her. They had raised Thor before, Loki had pointed out. Thor who used to electrocute his little brother on accident when he got too excited. Nari's magic was no different a power, Loki insisted.

And to think that Odin had killed her for it. That little dark haird child who had tiny pudgy fingers and a giggle that sounded like the tingling of little bells. Thor crushed the rock in his hand to powder. And to think Loki might think he'd take the murderer's side. Odin was no father of his if he had no qualms even for murdering his own granddaughter.

"I'm sorry, Thor." Loki whispered into the cold starry night. "I'm so sorry." Tears shone in his brother's eyes, still trained on the sky above them. "For Jotunheim, and New Mexico and the Bifrost, and your coronation, and Midgard, and New York and Germany, and--"His brother's voice

was shaking and it terrified Thor. “--and I was jealous of you as a child, and I’m sorry… and for lying to you and for deceiving you and for not telling you-- everything.” Loki bit his lip and his tears finally spilled over his eyes and down his cheeks. He looked away from Thor again to hide his weakness.

Thor teared up himself, because why not. He was just blubbering like a baby most of the time now, why break a perfectly good record?

“What about that time when you turned yourself into a snake--”

“--and then shifted back to stab you?” Loki laughed through the tears. It was a laugh that half bordered hysteria, but it was a laugh. “No,” he chuckled, “I’m not sorry for that. That was hilarious.”

“Well then I’m not sorry for teasing you before your wedding night.” Thor teased back.

“Then I’m not sorry for calling you an idiot in front of the ambassador from Aflhiem!” Loki shot back.

“I’m not sorry for stealing your clothes after bath when we were boys.”

“It was you!” Loki gasped with a grin as wide as the sky above them that still glittered in tears but was honest and mirthful. “I still thought it was Fandral all these years! Ha! Confession caught!”

Thor chuckled and nudged Loki with his shoulder as he murmured,

“All is forgiven… do you forgive me?”

“Thor…” Loki’s smile dropped. “Don’t … you don’t want to forgive me for… everything.”

“Yes I do.” Thor nodded firmly. “I forgive you Loki. For everything. Will you forgive me?”

Loki looked a bit lost. He had this dazed look on his face as though he couldn’t quite comprehend how he could possibly be forgiven.

“Yes… of course.. Of course I forgive you Thor…?” He still looked uncertain and confused.

Part of it broke Thor’s heart and the other part warmed the broken pieces. He wrapped his arm about Loki’s shoulder and let his head rest against his brother’s. Finally he titled his gaze up to look at the stars with Loki in the silence again.

He didn’t know what his wife and his brother saw in the lights in the sky, but he looked and he waited. Someday… he knew the mystery of the stars would be revealed to him as well.

For now he was just grateful to have his brother by his side again.

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Warning: This is where it gets heaviest, guys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 26

“Holy water cannot help you now
A thousand armies couldn't keep me out
I don't want your money, I don't want your crown
See I've come to burn your kingdom down”

“Seven Devils” Florence + Machine

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Considering the bloody act of vengeance they were planning on attempting, Thor noticed the sun was surprisingly gentle as it rose in the sky the next morning.

Sif was packing up camp with Volstagg diligently while Fandral preened in the river reflection and polished his armor. Loki was dressing in his armor the old-fashioned way and Thor was helping him because some of the clasps and knots were simply impossible to shut and cinch on one’s own back. They hadn’t been able to grab one of Loki’s helmets but that didn’t seem to bother the prince who simply pulled his hair back out of his face again. Thor wondered a bit at it, certainly it was more practical then having hair in one’s face, but it wasn’t the Aesir way. A man’s hair was a point of pride… pulling it back was sort of downplaying it, especially for battle.

Thor also wondered at the white Irenae flower that his brother tucked under his breastplate, but he didn’t comment. The dark prince’s expression was enough to tell Thor it was for his family or Alannah. Although, Alannah was family at this point Thor supposed.

Loki strapped their mother’s short swords to his back, making a ‘v’ with the hilts behind his neck, instead of how Frigga would have worn them at the hip, due to the difference in builds. Both brother’s seemed to be a bit uncomfortable with the idea of bringing their mother’s weapons into battle against their father, but,

“With any luck you won’t need them.” Thor clapped Loki on the shoulder encouragingly. When Odin came to him Thor fully intended to end it quickly, before Loki would have time to reach him.

Loki pursed his lips and looked away, no doubt still upset he wasn’t getting the first shot at Odin. Thor understood why it could be upsetting, but he wasn’t budging on this one. Odin would kill Loki. He might kill Thor, but it probably wouldn’t be his first option. He would probably try to debilitate him first and then Thor would have the opportunity to act before that happened. Loki, while a fierce warrior, was wielding two short swords and four fewer years of experience than Thor. He did not have his magic, or his accelerated healing, or lightning, or a magic hammer that was indestructible. No, Loki couldn’t be allowed to fight this battle. This was Thor’s chance to protect him, for once. This was redemption.

He gave Loki a reassuring smile and clapped him one more time one the back before going over to take a pack from Sif. Once camp was packed up on their back and the fire was out, the five warriors started the trek down the side of the mountains. With their pace and stamina it should only take them several hours, they would be to the main city by midday and to the palace by 2 in the afternoon. The elves would attack by 3.

Thor took the lead, Loki followed directly behind him, and Sif took up the rear behind Fandral and Volstagg who was listening to the former's wild tale about a date with a woman who had turned out to be an Alfheimian spy and his valiant deeds in protecting the state from her plot against the it.

"You mean the State we're now conspiring to stand against." He heard Loki mutter behind him. Thor reached back to elbow his younger brother a bit and earned a wry grin.

"What was that?" Fandral asked distractedly.

"Oh, nothing." Thor could practically hear Loki rolling his eyes behind him and a grin bloomed across his own face as well.

"Well, anyways, as I was explaining, there are certain things you can and can not tell a lady--"

"Yes, yes, I know, I'm married to one!" Volstagg shoved Fandral when the blond slowed down too much. "Get to the part where she turned out to be a spy!"

"Oh, right! Well, it was they way she picked up her salad fork, see, and she had a good accent but every now that then her 'g's would--" And so it continued until they reached the city gates and threw their hoods over their faces. There was once a day when Loki would take turns telling tales of fantasy with Fandral's tales of romance and wooing, but after Sigyn's death he'd stopped telling stories; except for in the form of lies. Sigyn had been the one to teach Loki the art of fiction. Thor decided he was going to have to ask Loki to tell another story when this nightmare was over. He missed them, there was much more variety to Loki's tales than Fandral's romances.

As they approached the palace grounds Thor stopped with a sudden weight in his stomach. Behind him Loki swore and Sif and Fandral gasped in unison.Volstagg was stunned silent. A dark column of smoke was rising from the heart of the palace and muffled screaming could be heard echoing through the walls of gold. Elvish ships swarmed the sky, already locked in battle with Aesir one's.

The elves decided to attack early.

Loki was cursing in elvish at the elves and Thor found in fitting. They could lose their chance to intercept Odin because of this. Civilians would likely die because over this.

"Finian I swear one of these days I'm going to bash that blonde braided skull of yours in for your idiocy!" Loki growled behind him unsheathing Frigga's blades. "Alright, same play, new rules; You three, south entrance. Thor you have the West. Elves are now considered the enemy, they broke the alliance by attacking the main halls of the palace. Protect civilians and servants at all costs. Questions?"

Every one firmly shook their head one and unsheathed their weapons.

"I'll see all of you when this is finished." Thor demanded of them all with a smile. Everyone nodded but Loki who said,

"Alright, let's go." Before dashing to the east wing. Thor nodded to his friends once more who took to the South and then he bolted to the West.

This day was far from over, but hopefully it would end well.

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This was going terribly. Loki was literally fantasizing about all the ways he could murder Finian right now. Why would he do this?! He had no quarrel with civilians and may have just cost them their shot at Odin.

Finian was gunning for the first shot at Odin, that's what it was. Loki felt like screaming in frustration. He was the one who had lost the most to this monster! So why was he the only one who could think logically about the situation!

Thor wanted to be the one to take Odin out because he thought he could do it better than Loki. But Odin had the power to not only strip Thor of his thunder and hammer, but to make Thor mortal.

What was Thor going to do if that happend? As nicely to be allowed to lift his hammer again? Ask for Odin to pull a few punches so he didn't crush his brittle mortal bones? No! Odin couldn't curse Loki as a mortal because all that would happen would be to change Loki back into his natural form; jotun, which was just as dangerous as an aesir. So in all reality, Loki had a better chance at surviving Odin. Still not great. But better.

And Finian? He was literally just running in there with blind fury and vengeance. Sigyn had been dead for five-hundred years without any reaction whatsoever from her brother! But now that he had someone to blame he was going to cost them their chance because he wanted it more?!

He was surrounded by idiots! Idiots with hearts of gold, in Thor's case, but idiots nonetheless.

Two elven warriors lunged at him with swords drawn and he dropped to duck the first swing, in order to keep his head. With a roll of both wrists he hamstringed them both as he rose to slit their throats with another set of precise slices.

He flinched at the whizzing of an arrow and snapped around with blades raised to swat them out of the air like flies. He sliced another one at the tip and dove behind a pillar. In three smooth movements he'd sheathed the right sword, drawn a dagger, and shot it at the unsuspecting archer who thought themself out of reach by dagger and fell with a surprised cry cut short.

He glanced around and stilled for a moment to listen for footsteps and stepped out to throw another dagger at a scout perched up in a window. He then drew his sheathed sword, for the comfort of having both in hand and started cantering down the hallway again, keeping his senses alert for attackers.

The boiling rage almost distracted him from the fear of what was coming.

Along the hallway there was the body of a young maiden, no older than Alannah, crumpled beneath the frame of an Aesir guard who had tried to protect her from a lance that had travelled right though his body and into hers.

The light blue color of her gown was stained a dark maroon from the blood that had blossomed from her soft belly. He couldn't tell if the blood splattered across her face and flecking her sightless eyes was hers or the guards but he grit his teeth and hurdled past them.

He had been clear with Finian; no civilian casualties. And this was no accident, the guard was protecting her because she was the target. Finian had made all of Asgard the enemy. If Loki got ahold of him, he'd kill Finian himself.

He'd do it now, except he was running out of time to catch Odin. the Allfather could very well be surrounded by a troop of the Eijnjar.

He sprinted down the corridors, gauging how much time he had by his estimate of how long the bodies scattered across the floor had been dead. His speed kept him difficult to shoot at especially with his path being scrambled by the bodies in his way and he cut down anyone who came against him easily.

He was attacked by a quintet of Elvish soldiers and he engaged them with several snaps and spins in a single blur of motion as his mother had taught him.

He could almost hear her voice scolding, 'Footwork, Loki.' as she would gently smack the insides of his feet with the flat side of her sword while he tried to stumble through the precise movements she insisted he practice. He didn't understand why "footwork" was so necessary.

Frigga fought more like a dance than hacking at one's opponent, like everyone else on Asgard, and for some reason she wanted Loki, of all people, to learn her methods. Thor wasn't sent through hours of "footwork" lessons or told to practice the same movement 1,000 times in a day.

Then again, Loki mused as he cut through the five soldiers like cream, perhaps he didn't need to fight like Thor. What Frigga saw in him wasn't his weaker strength than Thor, but his quicker speed and faster reflexes. Thor may be invincible to arrows, but he could not catch them in midair. Overall, Thor and Loki came out fairly equal, well, if you didn't count the fact that Thor had been given a magic hammer on invincibility and Loki had been given a pair of little daggers on their coming of age days.

The last two elves fell at the same time and Loki stepped over them to rush down a side corridor and slip into the Kings' Eastern Sanctuary.

"I was wondering if you'd taken the cowards way out and run back to the hills with your tail between your legs," Odin sneered as he stepped into the room. "I was going to offer quid pro quo, if you didn't spread such nasty rumors I might have spared your life… but it's much too late for that I'm afraid."

There were no guards. Only Odin, sitting on a large chair that looked like a throne. Of course he was on a throne. Power play, immediate intimidation. Reminding his opponent how much power he had. And how much farther beneath him they were. It worked.

Loki had to swallow hard before stepping the rest of the way into the room. Into the belly of the beast. The center of the flame. The den of the Lion.

The bait was caught.

The trap was sprung.

****

Thor realized Loki's trick as soon as he reached the West wing Sanctuary.

Bodies had littered the hallway. Thor had brutally massacred the remaining elves responsible.

He'd even found a little boy who'd been killed by a blow to the back of the head, no older than eleven or twelve. Dead. After closing the little boy's eyes the storm had started rolling in.

His path had been mostly clear after that initial massacre. Either the elves were concentrated

elsewhere, or they were smart enough now to stay out of the Thunderer's path.

He burst into the West Wing Sanctuary and was met with the sound of the wind. The dark red curtains surging on the current of the thunder's breath as the sky darkened from pearl to slate. The air tasted like salt as the breeze caught up the air of the sea and hurled it across dry land. The windows of the abandoned sanctuary wicked open and closed like the punchline to a morbid joke.

'Got you, brother.'

"NO!" Thor spun around in panic to look down the hallway in realization like a bloody dawn. The East wing sanctuary was two miles from here.

He drew back his hammer to wind up but suddenly it dropped like and anchor. The clang echoed through the chamber like the rattle of death. A door to his side opened and he spun around arms raised and ready to defend himself, panic overriding his senses.

He was mortal. He was mortal and unworthy of his hammer. Why was he unworthy--? Odin had changed the criteria of worthiness. Of course he had. Why hadn't Thor thought of that? Loki probably had. That's why Loki tricked him…

The gatekeeper of Asgard stepped through the open doorway. Thor's breath caught and he took a step back. Heimdall. He was the key. He was the variable that Loki had thought of but Thor had forgotten. Stupid.

"You told--" Thor was looking at Heimdal in white horror. Loki had tricked Thor into taking the West, knowing that Odin would be informed of which direction to go after Loki in. Loki had placed a trap, with himself as the bait.

Traps never worked well for the bait.

"I am bound to my King, my prince. I answer to him." Heimdal honestly looked ashamed.

"Have you no concious to answer to!" Thor roared snarling at Heimdal in terrified rage. Loki was facing down the Allfather with two little half blades and no magic.

"I do." Heimdal nodded solemnly, "Which is why I brought you this."

He held out the sword of the bifrost for Thor to take. Thor lunged for it and staggered for a moment under its weight. His strength was depleted. He had nothing to protect him but his armor. He was mortal. Human. Tiny. Pathetic.

But he would not abandon his brother now.

He turned back to the hallway and started the two mile trek with the heavy sword, human legs slowing him down into a stumble. He had to get there though. He had to reach his brother.

He'd just gotten him back. He could not lose him now!
****

Loki wouldn't say he was losing badly… per-say, considering that he was facing arguably one of the most powerful beings in the universe. But he was losing. And it was not good.

Odin was constantly tampering with Loki's magic throwing the leash taut just to snap it back in tight again and it felt like the only times he was allowed to breath was when the air was full of ash and ember. He choked on the collar about his magic and stumbled everytime a jolt of that white hot

pain snapped through his veins.

Still he managed to mostly avoid Odin's blows and jabs with Gungir, thanks to his speed and Frigga's maneuvering techniques. Odin lunged. Loki spun out of reach.

Gungir snaked out, Frigga's half blades flashed and whined under the weight of the attack.

As Loki blocked the spear, Odin threw a powerful blow into his stomach that doubled Loki over. A broad knee snapped into his face. The tip of the spear shot at his face he dropped to the ground to roll out of the way.

He snapped back to his feet and launched into an attack of his own. Using his momentum from jumping up he shot a quick left swipe and as Odin blocked it he managed an uppercut with his right fist, knowing the blade wouldn't make its mark.

Odin used his better balance and greater strength to send Loki flying against the throne. Loki barely dodged a lethal blow of magic. It was so powerful it shattered the throne and sent splinters flying across the room. It would take Odin two minutes to rebuild his reserves from an attack like that.

Loki used his greater height to his advantage and was able to bear down on Odin a few times and managed non-lethal blows to the neck and shoulders frequently with Frigga's short swords that drew blood and a savage smile from his opponent.

Odin kicked Loki's knees out from under him and Loki managed to partially sever Odin's hamstring as he went down earning a gasp and a howl from the King.

The Older stabbed down with the staff and the younger rolled away desperately avoiding the crashing jabs that punctured the stone in the ground with mighty cracks! that send jolts of adrenaline through Loki's veins.

Odin seized at his magic and shot pain through it again and Loki bit back a wail and his muscles seized. He managed one last duck and roll and clambered to his feet with the wall to brace him. Odin used his replenished magic to hurtle an attack of a different kind.

The crystal clear image of Nari's face, frozen in death like stone was shoved across his eyes. He froze.

That was all Odin needed.
Loki's mouth dropped open to gasp as Gungnir was shoved with an upward angle through his solar plexus and severed both lungs with a single slice. No sound sprouted from his lips.

He was lifted three inches off the ground by the force of the blow. Odin kept him pinned to the wall, hanging on the blade of the spear.

"You want to know why I killed your spawn, Laufeyson?" Odin spat, thick spittle spraying across Loki's bone white face.

"Because they were monstrosities! Because your seed, Jotun-cur, made beasts, not children! Because if I had let that little witch mature she would have been more powerful than Death herself! She was a freak! And the male wouldn't have been any different.You think you're avenging them by coming in here and dying? No. You're just being butchered like the animal you are. Do you understand? I didn't murder anyone. It's not murder when they're animals."
He shoved the spear harder into the wall so the tip bore all the way through the ribcage and anchored itself into the stone of the wall behind him. A whimper clawed it's way out of Loki's throat and brought the taste of copper with it. Odin sneered.

Loki’s hands desperately scrambled at the gold shaft of the spear was slick with crimson blood as the abdominal aorta burst and Loki’s hands slipped helplessly without any purchase.

A flash of gold magic shot up the rod and into Loki’s chest where it penetrated his soul vault. It was finished. This would be lethal.

Loki was suddenly overwhelmed by the realization that for once in his life, he didn’t want to die. Not like this.

“Don’t you ever think you were ever anything to me, jotun.” Odin hissed as though the word Jotun was enough of an insult.

It wasn't though. It was a reminder.

With one final, desperate act against his monstrous foster-father, now murderer, Loki forced the shift and felt his limbs go icy cold and skin mottle to indigo.

As red lit up his blazing eyes and the Jotun crown bloomed across his forehead, Loki’s right hand shot forward and sent dozens of icy shards through Odin’s exposed neck while he snarled up at him.

Odin choked and stumbled back, clutching at his throat with a sickening gurgle.

He fell to his knees before Loki, who was still suspended in the air on the shaft of Gungnir. With several thick icicles, dyed scarlet red, the King fell face first into a pool of his own blood. He shuddered once, and died quickly. Slain by a Jotun.

A petal of Alannah's white Irenea flower, severed by the blade thru his chest, fluttered to the ground and landed atop the growing pool of blood. It stained, but it did not sink.

Loki closed his eyes and shivered as the cold of his blue skin latched down into his bones.

Chapter End Notes

Tragedy is not the end of the story.

Chapter 27

Chapter 27

“If I was dying on my knees
You would be the one to rescue me
And if you were drowned at sea
I'd give you my lungs so you could breathe
I've got you brother.”

“Brother” Kodaline

****

Loki was so cold… shivering aggravated the wound but it was instinctual. He was bleeding out… the shattered soul vault was flickering within him, but that wasn’t what was going to kill him first. It was the ruptured aorta.

Blood washed down the front of his armor, trickling down either side of the spear shaft and running in a steady stream down his belly. He was trying not to breathe too hard, every movement sent pain, his brain couldn’t fully comprehend, exploding from his middle.

The room was silent except for his ragged gasps and the soft and steady percussion of his blood hitting the tiled floor. It was still red.

He thought of Alannah and he wanted to live. Odin was dead and Loki was still hanging on… perhaps if he could just pull the spear free? His trembling hands, blue as the evening sky grasped at the handle and he slowly slid his feet up a bit to push at the wall.

He pulled. Choked on a silent scream. The world flickered black.

****

When Thor was halfway to the East Wing Sanctuary, Odin’s curse dropped suddenly like a pair of severed manacles. Thor gasped as strength flooded his limbs again and stumbled forward on knees still adjusting back to the quick transition from meger to mighty. HE threw his hand out behind him and felt the power of Mjolnir sing to his palm as it hurtled down the throat of the corridor.

Thor tripped back into his run as he waited for the hammer to catch up and then rocketed forward as it snapped into his palm and flew to the east.

The Sanctuary door was locked. Thor let a short, panicked yell escape his closing airways anxiously and with two mighty blows he smashed the door open.

The room was splintered in metal and wood exploding from the epicenter of the room. The floor was cracked where the might of Odin’s blows gouged craters in the stone floor. Thor ignored the body of the King lying face first in a pool of his own blood to stare in knowing horror at his brother. His little brother. Pinned to the wall by the “spear of heaven,” his brother was limp and blue, a pond of glassy red growing beneath his feet. They were dead. They were both dead.

“No--” Thor choked, “Please no. Loki... Not you too…” He dropped his hammer and it’s echoed changed throughout the room like a funeral toll. Just once.

He stepped forward cautiously as though walking on ice and his vision was faded and unravelling. His heart beat thundered in his head and there was a loud clap across the sky.

He stepped over Odin, disregarding him entirely, and reached for Loki. He touched a blue cheek bone, cold, but not biting, and gasped when Loki raised his head halfway to try and meet Thor's eyes. His brother was too weak to even manage that, but he was still alive!

Feet sliding in the pool of crimson blood beneath him and palms slipping as they were painted red, Thor grasped the hilt of the mighty spear and pulled it free. Loki slid down the wall, slowed by Thor catching him to prop him up against it. Loki didn't even make a sound.

The Thunderer knelt in the pool of his brother's blood and cupped the Trickster's frozen face in his palms.

"Loki?" He choked, trying to process the fact that he had gotten here in time to say goodbye… but knew he would not be able to save Loki this time. It was both precious and mocking. "Brother? Can you hear me?"

****

Loki could hear him. Thor. He was far away, but he could hear him. He tried to open his eyes but their lids were so heavy. It was as if they'd been sewn shut. He shuddered at the memory of the needle and thread sewing his lips shut.

"Loki, it's alright, I'm here--" Thor whispered shakily. Loki tried to focus on his older brother's voice. Tried to navigate his way back to it. He could feel the rough calluses of the Thunderer's palms at his jaw, lifting his face… all Loki had to do was open his eyes… but it was so hard…

Like mining ruby gems, slowly, the red of his eyes began to surface as the weight of his eyelids were chipped away.

There he was. Thor. Blonde, and big and blubbering as usual. The red painted corner of his lips quirked. For some reason he was struck with the memory of one time when a nine year old Thor and stubbed his toe at the breakfast table and wouldn't cease his howling for anything. Chubby face thrown back to the sky, big mouth yawning open in a very exaggerated shriek and toe clutched helplessly to his chest as Thor jumped up and down hollering like a hound from Helheim. Big, blonde and blubbering indeed.

"I've got you, now." The man, that Thor had somehow grown into, promised with a forced smile of his own. "I'm right here with you, Loki."

A trembling blue hand tried to grab at Thor's armor, but his grip strength was gone and his hand slid down uselessly, leaving a red streak on Thor's glittering breastplate. Thor caught his hand, too weak to grip back, as grit his teeth as he said,

"What is it? What do you need?" Thor swallowed hard but managed to be gentle with his tone. Shouldn't he be angry with him? Loki had tricked him. He'd lied to his face. He'd let Thor believe that he was going to let Thor save him and then had gone and gotten himself fatally wounded. It was cruel and selfish of him.

His soul forge shuddered violently.

But he needed Thor. He'd lied to him and he probably deserved to be left here to die alone… but he was terrified. He'd never actually died… he'd been close, but never conscious… he didn't wanted to die alone.

“P….lssss….stay…” He whispered and the effort pulled a wheezing cough from his half-fluid-filled lungs. Copper paint splattered from his lips and speckled Thor’s face. That was disgusting. He wanted to apologize… but his words were gone… his lungs curled up into the warm liquid and began to fall asleep.

His brother ignored the blood sprayed in his face. Thor didn’t even flinch, he just nodded and clenched his jaw as he promised, “Of course I will, I’ll stay right here. I’m right here with you. I won’t leave you. See?” he slide down against the wall himself, heedless of the blood he was now sitting in, with Loki, and wrapped an arm around him, pulling him closer. Loki’s head fell against his brother’s shoulder and as his body slackened Thor supported him.

Loki wanted to say goodbye...'Goodbye. Thank you. You were always safe. Even when I was afraid of you. You were my protector and the one I protected. You were the shadow I was in, but I wasn’t stuck there, I took refuge in it mostly. You were the one I knew I could hate the most, because you were the one who forgave the most. I’m sorry I hurt you. I’m sorry I lie. I’m sorry I’m fickle. I still don’t know why… I’m sorry I’m broken, but I know I’m forgiven...you told me this morning under the stars...“All is forgiven… do you forgive me?”'

But that was a stupid question because he always forgave Thor, even when he didn’t. Because the only reason he hated Thor was because he loved him so much, and he knew he could never measure up, no matter how hard he trained or how much knowledge he gained.

He wanted to tell Thor that. Everything. He wanted to say goodbye, but there was a sharp tearing in both his lungs at once and he realized for the first time that drowning hurt. It felt like it lasted forever, leaning against Thor’s shoulder shivering and drowning in himself.

He couldn’t hear Thor anymore. He could feel his rumbling voice, but he couldn’t hear it. How was it that he missed it already? He was afraid to die.

'It’s alright, I’m right here.' Sigyn promised. She was kneeling in front of him with a small smile. Her soft hand came up to cup his face and… he could feel her.

'Is it time yet?' He whispered, and he could hear himself even though his lips weren’t moving.

Her sapphire eyes sparkled in delight as she could finally say, 'Yes. It’s time, Love. Come home. Come home with me.'

'I’m afraid.' he admitted. He could always be honest with her. There was no one else in existence he could be as honest with as his Sigyn.

'I know.' She leaned forward and kissed him. He was too weak to kiss back. 'But I’m right here with you. I’ll walk you through it.'

And so with that promise, “I’m right here with you.” On both sides, in life with his brother and in death with his wife, he passed from the arms of former and into the latter.

And he wasn’t alone.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 28

“Disbelief, when I first heard the news
It left me angry and confused
Knocked the wind out of my soul
When we lost what made us whole”

****

Jane never thought she would care about her brother-in-law. Not even a bit. But she did. She loved him. He wasn’t just her husband’s brother. He was her brother too.

When Thor returned to Earth to take her back to Asgard she knew as soon as she saw him that Loki was gone.

Loki had known this was coming… she knew by the way he’d said, “Goodbye, Jane.” and equally by how she couldn't say “Goodbye Loki.”

But even when you know something was coming, you can’t prepare yourself for when it hits. She couldn’t even get up from the breakfast table to go to her husband.

She’d just sat there while Stark got up to greet Thor and she stared at him.

He was dressed in black. His hair was pulled back from his face which looked haggard and worn. As soon as that pair of sorrow saturated eyes locked on hers she shut them tightly as if she could prolong the moment before grief hit her.

She had known her Mom was dying too. It hadn’t helped.

Thor hadn’t come over to her, he’d just stood there, shoulders finally broken under the world’s weight. Stark was trying for humor, like always, and Thor was nodding. His entire being subdued.

“Hey, Point Break.” Stark waved his hand in front of Thor’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“Loki is dead.” Thor said to Jane. Ignoring Stark who went uncharacteristically quiet.

“I know.” Jane whispered, and finally rose to go to her husband’s arms.

****

“And now there's a heat behind my eyes
And I can't stop asking why, why, why
They say it's gonna be okay but it doesn't take away the pain”

****

Thor couldn’t believe how quickly everything was just falling into place. Loki’s funeral was in two days, but already Thor had been crowned King and begun performing his duties as Monarch. His first act was to abolish the laws regarding how different races of prisoners were to be tried and

sentenced. It seemed fitting. It was a small document, a small step, but one that promised which direction his kingship was going to go.

His second act had been to dismiss two-thirds of the council. He kept a third of them that seemed at least partially open minded, and represented their group; same color, race, wealth etc…

The third act had been to replace them. Eir had been his first candidate.

“You do know I am a woman, yes?” She had given him the eyebrow of passing judgment.

“Yes, but you are one of the most wise and experienced nobles among us and your duties of Chief Healer should be represented on the council.” He had nodded seriously.

“And you do understand that I am not only the wrong sex, but the wrong color for a royal council?”

“The color of your skin should have nothing to do with it.” Thor had ground out, he was tired of this. This hatred that had cost him a brother. “If Loki were here, I would have him as the second head of the Council, and his skin color was blue, which is even more hated on Asgard than brown or black. Besides Heimdal is one of our greatest warriors as is Hogun.”

“They’re the only one’s.” She’d pursed her lips in disapproval again before crossing her muscular forearms across her broad chest and informing him, “You know the first centuries of transition are going to be hell, right?”

Thor nodded, “It’s worth it. For the millenia to follow, it’s worth it. But yes, the transition will be harsh… which is another reason I want you on the council. I think you’re one of the few strong enough to weather the storms ahead.”

“Thick-headed and stubborn.” She had snorted, “That’s what you mean.”

“No! I hadn’t meant to imply that--”

“Yes you did, and you’re right. I accept.”

Thor gave a small smile of triumph, the most he was able to muster these days and bid his new council member good day to seek out the others.

****

“We don't have to be afraid
Cause I don't think it's an accident that tears are shaped like seeds
So I'll bury all my fears and trust they're turning into trees
Oh, I'm fighting to believe
this is not the end of the story.”

****

Srusti had felt Shelah fade. She’d said a prayer to bid his spirit goodbye and immediately sought out Gurren to whom she’d ranted at for a solid hour before curling up on his lap and crying on his shoulder. She’d only met her twin once and she already missed him.

She’d never met Sigyn at all and she missed her.

“We should plead that your Brother-King allow us to leave and attend his funeral.” Gurren had

murmured as he combed her hair.

Srusti snorted. “Helbindi will allow it, but mark my words, the Aesir won’t have anything to do with us. Shelah was our only tie.”

“I know not…” Gurren had replied patiently, “I spent more time with the Crownling and he seemed agreeable to me…”

“Yeah? Did he seem agreeable when he came here to slaughter one-hundred warriors for the acts of two?” Srusti growled. She had performed the funeral rites for all those soldiers and prayed for each of their families.

“You’re brother-twin was the same, but you forgave him.”

“He changed.”

“So can we all, my love. Redemption is for anyone who will take it.”

So they had been granted permission by Helbindi to travel to Asgard again to ask for permission to attend the funeral.

The Crownling-King had offered to let her perform Jotun rituals, as the Temple Guard along with the traditional Aesir funeral launching of the boat. It was the chance to claim her twin as one of his own people. A chance to send him off the right way.

Srusti had wept accepting such a gift.

****

“Our lives are a poem: our sorrow, half the lines.
No, I don't think it's an accident that tears are shaped like seeds
So I'll bury all my fears and trust they're turning into trees,”

****

Thor didn’t want to touch Gungnir. He wanted to rule with Mjolnir. Not the weapon that his little brother had died on. But it was the only weapon that released souls off the edge of the realm. It was only a tool, he told himself, he would not use it for anything but funerals. Let it be a symbol of the dead and their release to Vahalla.

Loki had been dressed in tribal clothing of the Jotuns with his dark hair braided back in beautiful intricate knots and ties. His blue skin only accented the black and white of the painted runes eloquently inscribed on his already present tribal runes that Srusti had explained told the story of Loki and his Ancestors.

A red pattern had been painted across his bare chest and the backs of his hands that told of Thor and Frigga, the family of the story he had lived. Gold had been painted over his nails to speak of his undying love for his eternal mate, since he had not remarried after Sigyn had died. Green beads had been tied into his hair representing all of the families of Jotunheim that had claimed they still wanted to participate in honoring him, despite his crimes, because of his saving of the rest of their people with his plan. His waist was clad in a black, wolf-skin breechcloth that stretched down to his knees. His horned helmet placed at his feet in to boat and two green daggers were held in an ‘x’ across his chest.

Srusti had prayed over him in her ancient language and Thor and Gurren had each carried an end of

the boat to place it into the Sea of Eternity.

The Aesir citizens gathered to release their blessings from the shore had stared at his brothers body, as Jotun as he was Aesir. A perfect blending of two cultures. It was a small step forward, but a step all the right direction. No one could deny that the way Srusti had prepared her brother, the way she said goodbye, was beautiful. The Aesir could not deny the beauty of at least one Jotun ritual now.

As Thor dropped the mighty weapon he would not wield in battle, he watched his brother's soul fly to the heavens to join the stars, swirling like an eternal, dance of a flame.

He finally saw the beauty his wife and brother saw in the stars. They were not eternity.

But they were the promise of it.

****

"And I'll keep fighting to believe
That this is not the end of the story.
This tragedy is not the end of the story."

"Tragedy is not the End" Joel Ansett

Chapter End Notes

Phew! It's out! All of it! Thanks for sticking with me to the end! I know you probably hate me a little right now, but I promise all of this was for a reason. I never end a story in tragedy unless tragedy speaks truth better than "happily ever after".

I've experienced a lot of grief this past year (but really over the past eleven years as well) and Love Your Brother was a part of me learning to say goodbye. Goodbye to friends, goodbye to family, goodbye to the person I thought I was going to be. Goodbye to suicides, car accidents, and cancer victims; I know you by name and I know that your deaths do not define who you were in life. I pray I get to see you all on the other side of eternity.

As for my readers, I hope more than to just make you sad, I was able to impart a bit of wisdom, comfort, hope, new thoughts or at least some understanding along the way. (as well as just the enjoyment of a good story with these beautiful characters.)

Don't forget to love your brothers and sisters next to you, across from you, and far, far away from you. You never know how much time you'll get to have with them.

Love,

D.

P.S. PLEASE COMMENT! at least once. :) I really would love feedback constructive criticism or just thoughts on anything i've brought up. :) Also, I'm considering writing a sequel for Alannah, tell me if you'd like that or if you think I should just leave it all alone.

P.P.S Once again, find me on Instagram @d_reagan_fly for my thoughts on writing, fanfiction, character development, character enneagrams/myers briggs, and more!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!